



As Dawn Breaks

— A NOVEL —



Praise for Kate Breslin

"*As Dawn Breaks* is a riveting and richly researched tribute to the courageous heroines of the First World War whose contribution as munitionettes played a vital role in Great Britain's war effort. Kate Breslin crafts a multi-faceted story of breathless suspense, memorable characters, and authentic emotional depth layered upon a canvas of war. Readers will be captivated by this exquisite blend of historical intrigue and heartfelt romance from one of the finest voices in inspirational fiction."

Amanda Barratt, author of *My Dearest Dietrich* and *The White Rose Resists*

"Breslin's pen is masterful with brilliant strokes of romance, suspense, and the search for courage written into every page. Dazzling with historical detail, *As Dawn Breaks* takes readers into the heart of the war effort as women enter the factories as munitionettes, famously coined Canary Girls, while the men are off fighting during the Great War. The characters are complex and realistic as they speak to the human emotions of loss and love. Another not-to-be missed tale from this amazing author!"

J'nell Ciesielski, bestselling author of *The Socialite*

"In *As Dawn Breaks*, Kate Breslin takes readers on a heart-pounding journey across Great Britain with clandestine characters who are struggling together to stop a dangerous foe. Once again, Breslin has woven together a brilliant mystery, romance, and World War I conspiracy that will keep you riveted until the enemy is finally exposed."

Melanie Dobson, award-winning author of *Catching the Wind* and *The Curator's Daughter*

"Riveting! With her trademark attention to historical detail, Kate Breslin sweeps readers to a Great War home front full of intrigue, suspense, danger, and courage. For both the heroine and the war effort, the stakes could not be higher. Through this cast of nuanced characters, we explore loss and new beginnings, a longing to belong, and the meaning of home. Well before the last chapter, you'll feel as though the family within these pages is your own. An immersive, absorbing, and completely satisfying read."

Jocelyn Green, Christy Award-winning author of *Shadows of the White City*

Books by Kate Breslin

For Such a Time

Not by Sight

High as the Heavens

Far Side of the Sea

As Dawn Breaks

As Dawn Breaks



KATE BRESLIN



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This is a work of historical reconstruction; the appearances of certain historical figures are therefore inevitable. All other characters, however, are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

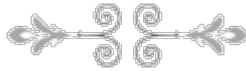
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To our families

Whether we are born to them, create them, or
choose them along the way, love and acceptance
are what bind us.



For the women working in munitions during WWI

May their hard work and sacrifice in saving a
nation and their fighting lads never be forgotten.

By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,
to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of
death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.

Luke 1:78–79 NRSV

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Prologue

AYLESBURY PRISON
BUCKINGHAMSHIRE, ENGLAND
EARLY MARCH 1918

Only by searching the bowels of hell would he find the devil.
“The prisoner’s cell is this way, Captain. If you’ll follow me.”

Marcus Weatherford pulled his gaze from the shadowy confines beyond the barred gate to glance at the uniformed warden. Then with a backward nod to his companion, the two men followed the warder into the gloom.

As they passed a checkerboard series of locked doors along the dimly lit hall, Marcus again prayed their mission wasn’t in vain. Would the prisoner, only four months into a two-year sentence for forgery, be willing to cooperate? More importantly, were MI5 and Scotland Yard on the right track, or was this another fool’s errand?

“Here.” The warder halted in front of a door with a small, barred window. Marcus stepped forward to peer into the cell. “Unlock it and leave us.”

“I’ll need to remain just outside here, sir.”

“As you wish.” Once the door was opened, Marcus and his companion entered the sparse room. The inmate sat on the narrow bed, attempting to sew a button onto a plain white shirt. The afternoon’s gray light flooded in through a tiny window at the back of the cell.

Ashen and thin, the prisoner set aside the shirt and rose from the bench. Defiant blue eyes held his gaze. “Who are you?”

“Detective Quinn with New Scotland Yard.” Marcus turned to indicate his companion. “And I’m none of your concern at the moment. We’ve come to make a deal *if* you have the right answers to a few questions.”

The insolent expression thawed. “What questions?”

“Do you know a man called Thomas Brown?”

“Never heard of him.”

“What about Rhymer?”

The blue eyes flared, and Marcus leaned in, his pulse thumping.

“What do you know?”

The prisoner’s head cocked slightly. “Why should I trust you?”

“Because you have little choice. Quinn and I can stay and hear what you have to say and perhaps make a deal. Or we can leave you to go back to your . . . buttons.” Marcus nodded toward the crumpled shirt on the bed.

A breath expelled from the sullen mouth. “I had a brother Thomas, but the name Brown means nothing. He likened himself to Thomas the Rhymer, from an auld Scots fairy tale told to us as bairns.” The eyes clouded. “Thomas died years ago, somewhere across the world.”

“Perhaps not.” Marcus fished from his pocket a small, frayed paper tag penned with a set of numbers. He held it up for inspection.

“Recognize this?”

The prisoner’s pallor flushed. “Where did you come by that?”

“An abandoned flat in Paris. It’s stamped *Ezekiel House*, an orphanage on the outskirts of Glasgow. Is it yours?”

“Aye. The tags were marked with our room and case number. ’Tis how they identified us.” The prisoner’s eyes lifted. “You said you found the tag in France?”

Marcus almost smiled. Another puzzle piece fitted into place. The orphanage had verified there was a brother Thomas and, after combing through Glasgow’s old police records, Marcus found the boy described as having dark hair and blue eyes, much like the prisoner. “If your brother is alive after all these years, what proof can you offer to make a positive identification?” He tucked the tag into his jacket pocket.

“Otherwise, no deal.”

Instead of answering, the prisoner’s lips compressed into a flat line. Marcus struggled to hold on to his patience. They needed confirmation.

When the silence stretched on, he turned to Quinn. “I think we’re finished here—”

“Wait.” The prisoner stepped forward. “Thomas had a red birthmark above the hairline.”

“Where on his head?”

The blue eyes gleamed. “Put me in the same room with him and I’ll show you.”

Marcus did smile then. The police report also described a port-wine

birthmark. They now had their irrefutable witness. “Our deal is a full pardon in exchange for your help in identifying Rhymer, the man we suspect is your long-lost brother, Thomas.”

“A pardon? Just like that?”

“Just like that.” Marcus frowned. “But be warned: Any betrayal on your part will constitute treason to the Crown.” He leaned in. “That means death.”

The prisoner’s nostrils flared. Marcus didn’t back down. “Do you understand and agree to the offer?”

“Aye.”

“I’ll make the arrangements.” His pulse thrummed. “Speak of this to no one.”

He gave the prisoner a final warning glance and left with Quinn.

Now they could prepare for the next stage of the trap—capturing Rhymer, the saboteur MI5 and Scotland Yard had been working feverishly to find. And once they made an arrest, they would have the proof needed to arrest the real mastermind . . .

A man scheming to bring Britain to its knees by killing thousands of its citizens.

1



NOTTINGHAM, ENGLAND

MONDAY, JULY 1, 1918—FOUR MONTHS LATER

Her final moments of freedom. Like the rattling gasps before death.

Rosalind Graham's throat constricted as she surveyed her sanctuary for the last time. In a matter of days she would receive her sentence; a prisoner, denied the right to an opinion or to make her own choices. Fated to live out her life in bondage, concealed beneath the sanctified guise of marriage.

"Rose, you didn't hear the whistle? Shift's over and I'm due back at the Mixing House before I can clock out. I want to speak with you before you go off and leave me forever."

Seated inside her small overhead crane, Rose gazed down at the jaundiced face of her co-worker, hailing her from the factory floor. Like most girls filling shells at the No. 6 Chilwell National Shell Filling factory, Tilda Lockhart had contracted the yellow skin and bleached hair of a "canary girl," as they were fondly called, from handling the explosive powder TNT.

Rose's job of moving the filled shells by crane onto railcars for shipment had spared her such physical consequences. Yet the grief in her best friend's upturned face matched the anguish in her own heart. "Wait for me, Tilly, I shall be down soon."

"I'll meet you over by the changing rooms."

Rose drew a deep breath once her friend departed, and gave her little world a last, lingering look. She stepped nimbly from the open crane and grabbed at the thick rope to shinny down to the factory floor. Her bruised arms ached with the burden of her weight—another reminder of Julien's private "talk" with her last evening on the kind of wife he expected.

She bit her lips to stave off a sob. Even now the church near Aunt

and Uncle's estate in Leicester was being readied for Saturday's nuptials. In five short days, any and all freedom would become forfeit.

She'd imagined having more time—time to experience life and its wonders, to be able to seek out a man she truly loved and with whom she could start a family. Pity's sake, she wasn't yet twenty-one years old! What terrible sin had she committed that she must become the property of a man as much a bully as her uncle?

You know the reason, Rose. See no evil, hear no evil. She mentally shoved the maxim aside. What good was wisdom when it came too late?

Her boots soon touched the floor, and she trudged toward the building's exit to go and say good-bye to her friend.

The munitions factory had become her refuge, a place to hide from her uncle's watchful eye while she enjoyed her work in aiding the war effort. Here she could laugh and be easy with Tilly and others that she considered the salt of the earth—not like the silly, snide upper-class girls from her boarding-school days. And she was able to earn her very own wage.

Except you haven't a farthing now, have you? Stepping outside the building into the bright July sun, Rose shoved her hands into her pockets. She considered again the most recent betrayal by her uncle who was also her *guardian*, a word she'd once naïvely likened to angels when she and her little brothers came to live with the Cutlers after their parents' death.

But Sir Ridley Cutler of Cutler Enterprises, the second largest weapons manufacturer in Britain, was as far from being heavenly as his ruthlessness could take him.

And now he'd stolen all her savings. Her last hope for independence.

She blinked against the glaring light, still aching with the memory of awakening last night to discover Aunt Delia in her room, removing the money from Rose's secret hiding place in the closet. When she'd climbed out of bed, Aunt quickly turned, and the hurt and indignation had stuck in Rose's throat seeing the tiny woman's genuine fear. The wide, dark eyes seemed to say, *Please go back to sleep and say nothing or he will hurt me.*

Her pity had won out and she'd settled back into bed until after her aunt had quietly left the room. Rose had thought to confront Uncle Ridley this morning over his coercing Aunt Delia, but she dared not anger him, not after his recent threat against little Douglas and Samuel. They were only eleven and eight years old, for pity's sake! She shivered

again at the notion Uncle would actually take them out of boarding school and ship them off to some orphanage overseas if she gave him trouble . . .

Marching across the cobbled paths between buildings, Rose headed toward the changing rooms. What a fool she'd been, playing up to his vanity months ago so that he would allow her to work at Chilwell. Likely her uncle knew her scheme even then but said nothing. After all, what better publicity for his weapons company than to have his own niece become a munitionette for the war? And then, on the eve of *her very last day of work*, he'd bullied her poor aunt into stealing her funds!

His theft only tightened the noose already around her neck. The same way he'd moved up her December wedding to Julien and then threatened the welfare of her brothers if she disobeyed.

Now you are good and trapped. Rose clenched her teeth. If she could only turn back the clock! Never would she have ventured into her uncle's library weeks ago and happened upon his dealings with Julien. . . .

"You're looking more angry than sad on your last day, Rose, but I'm glad to see a spark in your eyes."

Tilly stood outside the building, a clipboard shielding her eyes from the sun. "Let's go in where hopefully 'tis cooler."

Upon entering the shadowy interior, Rose paused once more to reclaim her sight.

A steady stream of first- and second-shift workers were entering and leaving through the changing room doors, the air an odd mix of fragrant soaps and powders from the women who had bathed and changed, and the pungent stench of sulfur clinging to those who had not.

Passing by the doors, the sounds of high-pitched female laughter rang from within as she and Tilly took up the bench seat just outside the room.

"So tell me, lass. After seeing you brood outside, can I hope you've decided to call off this farce of a wedding?" Tilly pulled off her work bonnet, revealing splotches of greenish-white hair. She wiped her damp brow. "'Tis time you came to your senses."

"Nothing so brave as that." Rose offered a weak smile. "I was just giving myself another good scolding. I should have hidden my money in a tree instead of a hatbox. Only a fool underestimates my uncle."

"Dinna blame yourself! 'Twas *his* crime, not yours. Sir lofty Cutler with his millions, and still he robs his own niece—and he makes your

poor aunt do the dirty work!" Tilly shook her head. "'Tis shameful and I dinna care if he is knighted. He probably paid for that title."

Touched by the show of support, Rose reached to squeeze Tilly's hand. After today she might never see her dear friend again. "Promise me, you *will* be at the church on Saturday? I . . . I will need you there more than I can say."

"You know that only death would keep me away, lass."

Tilly's blue gaze had turned suspiciously bright, and while the words were meant as a fervent promise, Rose worried. Her friend's complexion of late had turned even more sallow.

Tilly Lockhart was the strongest woman Rose had ever known, but the ill effects from TNT exposure were taking their toll. "Are you unwell, friend? You *would* tell me?"

"Dinna fash, I'm more than fit. 'Tis just this devilish heat." She tugged at the neckline of her boiler suit, revealing a glint of purple and silver against the white shirt collar beneath.

Rose gasped. "Is that a brooch you're wearing? How did you slip it past the inspector this morning?"

"Not so loud!" Tilly cast out a furtive gaze. "I didna wear the pin during inspection."

"Then how . . . ?"

"I hid it in here." Tilly poked a finger into her greenish hair, which was pulled into a bun.

Rose frowned. "You take too many chances, Tilly. You will be fined or get the sack if you are caught wearing it. The rules are clear—"

"No jewelry, hair grips, matches, or cigarettes." Tilly sighed.

"Believe me, I know the rules and risks, and how easily one could light off this tinder house." Her brow creased, eyes turning somber. "But I . . . had my reasons."

"What reasons?"

"I wanted you to see it. 'Twas my mother's and my only memory of her since she died birthing me. I'll never be parted from it." She cast about another quick glance, then pulled back her neckline to reveal the lovely jeweled thistle of amethyst set into silver. "'Tis our national flower, yours and mine." She tilted her head. "You are Scots, after all, despite your fancy speech and all that proper Sassenach schooling."

Eyes fixed on the brooch, Rose refrained from comment. Tilly didn't know all of Uncle's conditions in allowing her to be here. He wanted no "peasant speech" in his home, nor would the Earl of Stanton, her future father-in-law. A slip in diction would cost her the job.

"The amethyst *is* beautiful." She glanced up at her friend. "But you could have avoided the risk and shown this to me at our lockers this morning."

Tilly shrugged. "Maybe I feel a bit reckless. You're leaving, so it doesn't really matter what happens to me now."

"Do not say that!" Rose turned to face her squarely. "You will always matter to *me*." She reached for Tilly's hand. "I would have got the sack months ago if not for you. Do you remember? I fell off that silly ladder as I started climbing up into my first crane."

Tilly grinned. "I told the instructor it was because the rungs were oily and he should take more care."

Rose smiled. "You knew all along I was clumsy in those new boots. You even pretended to wipe away 'the oil' and then gave me a boost back onto the step."

"You were just nervous." Tilly shrugged. "'Tis quite a change coming from fancy dresses and boarding schools into a world of boiler suits and climbing ladders."

And finding my first true friend. Rose's eyes misted, recalling her first day at Chilwell. Seated alone on the bench beside her locker, she'd been nervous and afraid; the first whistle had already sounded and she was still finger-combing her hair after forgetting to put a brush into her toiletry bag before work. Being forbidden the use of metal hair grips, she couldn't seem to manage the thick unruly locks long enough to stuff them up beneath her work cap. With the clock ticking, she imagined failure before even starting her job—and being sent home to Uncle, who would mock her for thinking she could ever become a munitionette.

Tilly had appeared then, brush in hand, and after several brisk strokes deftly twisted and knotted Rose's curls into place so that they fit perfectly beneath her bonnet. The two had shared a smile before they rushed toward the changing room doors, laughing when they reached the timekeeper only seconds before the final whistle sounded. "You have been like a sister to me from the first day we hired on together," Rose said softly.

"Aye, we're the orphan twins," Tilly joked. "Though thankfully, *you* were saved from the streets." Suddenly her face crumpled. "Never forget me, Rose Graham."

"Never." Rose leaned to embrace her, and Tilly's grip on her was almost painful.

After a moment they sat back, and Tilly gave a loud sniff before she

recovered. "The truth is, I'm soon to leave the factory myself."

"You?" Rose blinked. "Where will you go . . . Canada?" Tilly often spoke of sailing across the Atlantic to that country one day.

"You can still come along, 'tis not too late." Tilly's eyes searched hers. "Son of an earl or no, you dinna have to marry him. He's a brute by all accounts, and trust me, you canna ken what freedom is until you've lost it."

Her words only increased Rose's anguish at her upcoming nuptials. "I would go with you if I could, Tilly, but I must stay for Douglas and Samuel."

"You said yourself the lads are doing well at school. They have each other. But you, Rose, your life will become an iron cage."

"Please stop." Her hands curled against her lap. "There are things . . . I cannot change."

"All right then," Tilly said softly. "But when you *can* change things, come take shelter with me across the sea. You'll always be welcome."

Rose knew that day would never come. Still, she managed to nod.

"Now, you've distracted me from my other purpose." Tilly straightened. "As you seem determined to go through with this marriage on Saturday, you must have a proper bride's showing of the gifts. I went home at lunch, and all is ready. There's to be a party at my house after the shift, so you must come."

"A party?" Rose's eyes widened. "For me?"

Tilly nodded, her features determined. "Take my bicycle—'tis red now, since I found an auld can of paint in the shed, and you ride on ahead. Remember how to get there?"

"A block past Attenborough station on the right." Rose had visited Tilly's cottage only once before, when Uncle's chauffeur took ill and she was allowed to ride the forty-minute train in from Leicester.

"Aye, 'tis just a mile away. Once I finish here, I'll round up some of the lassies and we'll meet you."

Rose senses hummed. A real party with friends! Then she remembered Miles Luther awaited her outside in the Rolls and her enthusiasm dimmed. "Oh, Tilly! I wish I could, but Luther—"

"Och, dinna mind your uncle's sheepdog." Tilly handed her the clipboard with paper and a pencil. "Write Luther a note. Say you must work three extra hours. 'Tis for the lads at the Front, so he willna suspect and go tattling to 'Sir Cutler.' Tell him to come back and collect you at nine o'clock tonight."

Pencil in hand, Rose stared at the blank sheet. What if her lie was

discovered? Luther might spot her riding the red bicycle toward Tilly's house. She didn't dare defy Uncle, not when Douglas and Samuel would pay the price. She tried handing back the clipboard. "No, I really cannot take the chance."

"'Tis your *last chance!*" Tilly frowned as she crossed her arms, refusing the offering. "Trust me, Rose. No one will find out. How long has it been since you've had an hour or two of enjoyment? We'll have ginger biscuits and tea and play cards. You can even fetch my brass tub from the shed and have a cool soak before the rest of us arrive."

Rose set the clipboard back in her lap. Tilly was right. Her last chance at freedom before Julien closed the door on her life. And with Douglas and Samuel away at school, there was no one else on earth with whom she'd rather spend this time.

She scribbled her note to Luther.

"I'm glad to see you're a brave lass after all." Tilly's tone had eased. "I'll have the dust boy, Jeremy, take the note to Luther at the front gate while you slip out the back."

Pulse racing, Rose returned the clipboard and note to her friend. Tilly's relieved smile matched her own. They could postpone their good-byes for a few more hours.

"One more thing." Tilly plucked from beneath her boiler suit collar the thin chain of spark-resistant brass that held her factory-numbered disk. A metal key also hung from the chain.

"Tilly, that key is—"

"Against regulations, aye." Tilly flashed a look of sufferance. "But you willna get into my cottage any other way . . ." She paused at the sound of approaching female voices. A pair of floor supervisors walked in their direction. "Here." Tilly pressed the chain with the key into Rose's hand. "Now give me yours, so I'll have a tally disk to show at the gate when I leave."

"Won't the gate guard know the difference?"

"Ha! Auld one-eyed Griggs pays no mind. He just writes down the number and says 'Pass.' Be quick now. I canna be late to meet my . . ."

Rose's hand shook as she quickly palmed Tilly's chain, then removed her own and gave it to her friend. Once the supervisors had passed, she caught up with Tilly's note of hesitation. "Meet whom?"

"Not important. Just a final task to finish." Slipping the chain over her head, Tilly stood as she tucked it beneath her uniform. "I'll be along with the others before you know it."

Her smile seemed at odds with her pale face and sorrowful eyes, and

Rose's worry returned. "Tilly, there is something you are not telling me. Are you all right?"

"Dinna fash about me." Picking up the clipboard, she held it to her chest. "I'm too braw to be sick or put down easily. Remember, I grew up on the streets of Glasgow. Not even the cheeky London lassies I oversee in the Pressing Room dare to give me guff." She looked away. "If I seem sad, 'tis because I'm already missing you.

"But enough blethering." She drew in a breath and smiled. "We'll enjoy the hours we have left. Now go and have a soak in the tub, and dinna let Winston into the cottage. He's likely been in the neighbor's sty again, the daft dog."

Despite her misgivings, Rose grinned. "I'll see you there."

She watched her friend leave for the Mixing House, before entering the changing room where several first-shift factory girls still bathed and dressed. Swiftly, Rose peeled out of her boiler suit and, garbed in her chemise, padded barefoot into the washroom to join her co-workers, who would be scrubbing away the day's traces of chemicals before leaving the factory.

Even with all her current troubles, or perhaps because of them, her heart thrummed as she imagined the upcoming revelry. It was ages ago, during her childhood in Edinburgh, that she'd last had a real party.

The austere halls and grand rooms at Leicester were devoid of any such frivolities. No birthdays or balls, especially with the war on. Only at Christmas when she, Douglas, and Samuel were not at school did Uncle Ridley install a holiday tree, and only then so he could entertain his business associates. Her aunt would always slip Rose a pretty ribbon from her sewing box and give candies to the boys.

The bittersweet memory of those small tokens made her smile as she finished scrubbing.

Christmas was the only time Aunt Delia defied her husband.

Back at her locker, she dressed while a middle-aged co-worker rummaged through a locker a few feet away.

"Ay luv, 'ave ye any Oatine Cream?"

Rose turned at the question.

The woman looked perplexed. "I 'ad a full tin 'ere, but I've searched and it's gone."

Oatine Cream was a popular face lotion, advertised to keep a munitionette's skin soft and healthy after being exposed to the harsh chemicals at the factory.

It also happened to give Rose hives. "I am sorry, I do not use it."

"Well, ain't that grand." The woman scowled. "I spend my earnin's on pricey cream so's it's get pinched from my locker. One o' those dodgy Scotch, no doubt."

Rose stiffened at the remark. It wasn't the first time someone had disparaged her northern heritage. Perhaps a lesson was in order. "I still might be able to help," she said. Tilly used the cream.

She went to her friend's locker and opened it—and drew back at the pungent fragrance. Roses? When had Tilly started wearing perfume?

Delving through the clutter, Rose located her friend's array of toiletries. "Here we are." Reaching for the face cream, she noticed beside the tin a small red box with French gold lettering. She leaned in for another whiff. Definitely roses. Did Tilly have a beau?

Closing the locker, she offered the tin. "You may borrow this."

The woman's face brightened, and when she took the cream, Rose smiled and said, "I'm certain my Scots friend will not mind."

The woman hesitated, eyes wide. "Thank ye."

At least she had the good grace to blush. Satisfied, Rose returned to finish her toilette and mulled over the possibility Tilly had an admirer. Her friend's earlier remark came to mind. *"I canna be late to meet my . . ."*

Sweetheart? Rose smiled at the fanciful thought. Tilly wouldn't keep him a secret. But the perfume?

She stared at her friend's locker. What if it was meant for *her*? The flower scent *was* roses.

Suddenly her eyes burned. Tilly's kindness and generous heart knew no bounds; she'd arranged a party tonight in Rose's honor, with tea and biscuits and other favors. Why should she be surprised that her friend also wanted to present her with the lovely French perfume?

And then all too soon we will part from each other. Her lips compressed as she leaned against her locker. Once she crossed a chasm of no return with Julien, her dear friend would cross an ocean. How could she face the miserable future without Tilly?

Closing her eyes, Rose prayed as she'd done so often in the past few months, asking for some sign of deliverance. *Lord, please tell me how to carry this burden.*

As if awaiting an answer, she remained still for several seconds. But only the echo of feminine laughter and the slam of a locker door met her ears.

She would beg Tilly to remain in England! With the war on, Julien's

flights back and forth to France were frequent, and since Rose had accepted Uncle Ridley's edict to wed, his watchfulness over her would surely lessen. She and Tilly could still have their friendship.

Her hopes glimmered. She would speak with her friend tonight at the party.

Quickly, Rose finished dressing and left the changing room to head for the factory's exit.

The tall, grizzled Griggs stood heads above the many first-shift workers who were leaving through the back gate. Clad in his worn infantry uniform and wearing his black eye patch, he made entries in his ledger as the line moved slowly forward.

As her turn came, Rose tried to steady her breathing. Her fingers fumbled for the brass disk on the chain, and she held up the numbered ID.

Griggs gave it a glance before his single bloodshot eye focused on her. Seconds passed as she held the air in her lungs, and she thought she might suffocate. Behind her, workers bent on leaving grumbled impatiently.

Her hand with the disk began to shake. *Lord, please help me!*

A group of boisterous second-shift workers suddenly entered the back lot, and one of them called to Griggs in greeting. The old guard turned from her to raise a hand in their direction, then quickly scribbled her ID number into his ledger. "Pass."

Nervous laughter bubbled up, popping out as a high-pitched squeak before Rose was able to quash it. Keeping her head down, she dared not look at Griggs as she hurried past him and through the gate.

Tilly's red bicycle was easy to spot amidst the hundreds of black two-wheeled conveyances crowding the lot, and soon Rose was on her way riding toward the town of Attenborough.

She pedaled hard toward the railway station, the exercise releasing her pent-up anxiety. Luther must have received her note at the front gate by now. Would he decide to wait for her the three extra hours . . . or return to the estate?

As her bicycle flew past leafy green poplars and tall oaks, past the parched lawns and rows of brown-and-gray houses abutting the street, she couldn't help darting an occasional glance behind her. If he did discover her on his return to Leicester, the stocky chauffeur would haul her bodily into the car and take her home to face her uncle's wrath.

She shoved away the worrisome thought as she passed the rail station, heaving a sigh when Tilly's white cottage came into view.

Riding up onto the dried lawn, she dismounted and leaned the bicycle against the wood siding.

Fishing the chain with the key from her blouse, Rose jogged in an unladylike manner up the short flight of steps to the porch. She crouched to insert the key—but found the door already unlocked when the knob turned easily. Tilly had forgotten to secure the cottage after lunch.

Rose straightened and began pushing the door open when a low growl sounded behind her, followed by a rapid staccato of yips.

Smiling, she turned. “You must be Winston . . . Ugh!” She held a sleeve to her nose. The dog was covered in awful-smelling mud. “You’ve been in the pigsty again, haven’t you?”

The small terrier’s pink tongue lolled to one side of a dirty mouth while his dark eyes gleamed with mischief. She held her breath as she raised the hem of her skirt, hoping he wouldn’t jump up and soil her clothes.

Winston saw an opportunity—and darted between her feet into the house.

“Get back here, you rascal!” Dropping her hem, Rose whirled around and followed the dog inside, then spied his dirty paw prints trailing across Tilly’s polished floors. “Oh no!”

Winston paused to look back at her, his muddy stub of a tail wagging as if daring her to chase him. Determined to outsmart the animal, Rose quickly scanned the parlor before spotting Tilly’s white apron tossed over the back of a chair. She retrieved the smock and held it in front of her, creeping slowly toward the dog and talking softly. “There’s a good boy. All you need is a thorough scrubbing, and I know where Tilly keeps the tub.”

She waited to pounce as Winston gave a yip and another wag of his tail. He started back toward her, and Rose reached out with the apron to grab him—

The roar of thunder rocked the cottage on its foundation. Tilly’s furniture danced around the room at the same instant glass shattered from the windows in all directions.

Rose flew backward, feeling the bite of the shards in her flesh as she crash-landed several feet away. She clutched for the frantic terrier, curling up with him on the parlor floor.

German Zeppelins? Blood pounded in her ears as she craned her head, looking toward the broken windows, but she could see nothing. Her arms hugged the squirming dog to her chest.

Breathless, she waited for the next attack, and after another distant explosion echoed through the cottage, there was silence. She managed to sit up, holding on to the dog lest he walk on broken glass.

Gradually, she became aware of more noises—whistles and people shouting. Scrambling to her feet, she rushed toward the open door and released Winston to run outside.

Dozens of Tilly's neighbors clogged the street, crying and pointing toward the station. Rose left the cottage, walking across the lawn to follow their direction—and stared in horror at the enormous black cloud billowing upward into the sky.

Not the train station.

She fell to her knees in the dry grass. The devastation at No. 6 Chilwell was glaring even from a mile away. The remnant of factory buildings and tall stacks became a dark blur amidst the gray-green smoke spreading outward and heading into the town of Attenborough.

Tilly. Rose joined the neighbors who had started rushing forward, praying as she ran toward the place that had once been her sanctuary.

All around them the toxic gray haze had begun to settle, casting shadows against the leaves on the trees and tiled rooftops of row houses facing the street. Her lungs filled with the acrid smoke, and as she began to cough, she fished the handkerchief from her sleeve.

Drawing nearer to the destruction, she and the others had to dodge pieces of the wreckage littering the street while other debris continued raining from the sky. Rose screamed as she recognized the unspeakable carnage landing near her feet, and she tried to run even faster. *Dear Lord in heaven, so many bodies . . .*

By the time she reached the factory she was faint, her lungs burning. The opened west gate provided access, and she and the others headed inside. Whistles and bugles blared behind them as local ambulances and police lorries sped past.

Desperate to find her friend, she plunged into the mayhem. Hundreds of panicked workers, many of them wounded, swarmed to escape the factory's complex. Fires burned unchecked as volunteers frantically worked to extinguish the explosive flames.

She cried out at the sight of a co-worker—a fellow crane operator—severely burned and being lifted onto a stretcher and taken into an awaiting ambulance.

Lord, please let me find her! Rose pressed on toward the Mixing House, where Tilly had said she must finish a final task before leaving. The caustic air tasted bitter, her burning eyes tearing up as she picked

her way through the rubble toward her destination.

She hadn't gone far when she paused beside the damaged rail of a metal platform overlooking the factory. Her sudden, sharp breath stung her raw throat.

Over half of Chilwell was gone. Completely destroyed. And the Mixing House—

She grabbed for the steel rail, her watery gaze fixed on the patch of scorched earth—all that remained of the building where her friend had been. “*Nooo!*”

Viciously, she rubbed her eyes with the grimy handkerchief. But when she looked up again, she saw only the horrible empty . . . nothing.

Rose lowered her head and stared listlessly at the ground near her feet. A glint of glass caught her eye and she bent to pick up the debris. Dizziness swarmed her, noting the silver now covered in soot while the glass—a purple jewel—remained pristine.

Attached to the brooch was a charred piece of dirty white cloth. Part of a collar . . . *’Twas my mother’s. I’ll never be parted from it.*

A deep sob tore from her chest. She would never see Tilly again.

2



The soft whimper awoke her.

Rose opened her eyes, blinking at the bright light flooding through the open windows. She lay huddled in a ball on the parlor floor much as she had before, though now a lap blanket protected her from the glass shards. She stared at the toppled furniture. *Tilly . . . ?*

Another high-pitched whine sounded beside her ear. “Winston.”

The grubby dog rested on his belly, inches away from her head. He gave a soft yip, then crawled forward to lick her face. Rose raised herself to sit, every muscle in her body aching. Her sore throat and stinging eyes proof against the caustic haze still permeating the air.

She shook her head, trying to clear it. *What time is it?*

Her wristwatch was covered in sooty ash and she wiped the face clean, shocked to discover the hands read one o’clock in the afternoon. She looked back at the open window. Had she slept almost a full day since the explosion?

No. Staring at the grime on her blistered hands, the memories returned; the acrid stench of smoke, and the weight of an injured woman—a shell cleaner she’d dragged outside away from the burning building. The agonized cries of the wounded as dozens of frenzied, soot-faced workers pulled at a collapsed beam trapping those beneath. The eerie moan of twisting steel just before an overhead crane crashed onto a pallet of filled shells.

Her relief when the shells didn’t detonate was short-lived, as the factory floor had rocked beneath her with another blast from the next building.

Rose rubbed her sore eyes as though to erase the horror, then opened them again, assessing her condition. Aside from burns on her hands, her filthy clothing reeked with the bitter smell of smoke and ash. How had she managed to find her way back to the cottage last night after leaving the devastation? It must have been a miracle, or someone . . .

“Tilly?” She climbed to her feet, heart surging. “Tilly, where are you!”

Shouting for her friend, she rushed through each room in the cottage, taunted by the memory of the brooch and the hours she’d spent afterward searching the ambulances, even the factory hospital, without success. Yet she prayed against the proof, and her own reason, that Tilly would suddenly appear from one of the rooms, whole and safe and smiling.

Her friend was nowhere to be found.

Rose stumbled back into the kitchen, desperate for a glass of water to slake her enormous thirst.

She noticed the decorations for the first time.

Her feet moved slowly toward the festive table and its covering of bright plaid cloth. With a finger she trailed an invisible line across the pretty blue teapot and rims of mismatched cups. A red cake tin sat beside the tea set, and ironically nothing seemed disturbed from the explosion.

Tilly had planned this party in her honor. “A showing of the gifts,” she’d called it, to celebrate a bride’s coming wedding.

Now her friend wouldn’t be at the church on Saturday.

Her chest constricted as she fished into the pockets of her skirt and withdrew the thistle brooch, its silver still blackened, the attached fragment of cloth singed and dirty. Her plan to beg Tilly to stay in England—to continue their friendship despite the marriage and help Rose to cope with a future she dreaded—was gone.

She tried breathing in and out deeply to steady her hammering heart while her gaze swept the table. A white beribboned box sat at the opposite end, and she remembered the red box of perfume in Tilly’s locker, heavy with the scent of roses. Another gift her friend would never get to present.

Setting the brooch on the table, she approached the box and with shaky hands untied the white ribbon and examined the contents.

The first keepsake was a snapshot, taken by the factory photographer at Chilwell’s last May Day picnic. She and Tilly sat outside at a table, bonnets off and beaming for the camera.

Her throat ached as she studied Tilly’s beloved face, her broad smile and dimpled right cheek as their two heads bent together. Some co-workers thought them related, both with “blue eyes and the brown hair of Lowland lassies,” as Tilly liked to say. In the picture, her friend’s hair had not yet discolored from the TNT. The picnic seemed ages ago.

Had it only been two months?

She flipped the photograph, her lips trembling as she recognized the cleverly scrawled words on the back. “*R and T—Rose and Me—Sisters of the heart we shall always be.*”

“Even in heaven, dear friend,” she whispered, then carefully laid the picture aside and removed the next gift from the box.

A tiny cloth purse made from the same plaid as the table covering. Rose opened the clasp and withdrew a folded bank note. Her eyes widened. *Five pounds!* Nearly a month’s wages for a munitions worker.

Had Tilly decided to help her gain her freedom despite Uncle Ridley’s theft?

Rose withdrew the next item—a folded advertisement for a place called Nova Scotia in Canada. The painted illustrations revealed spacious green land surrounded by the sea and fishing boats nestled inside a small harbor. Beyond the beach stretched hills thick with tall pine and fir, and in the distance the gentle slope of a mountain.

The ad, a few years old, encouraged people to emigrate from Britain and homestead along Nova Scotia’s beautiful shores.

Despite her pain, the irony made her smile. *She’d* been planning to convince Tilly to stay in England, while her friend intended to convince *her* to sail across the sea.

Now neither of them would get what she wanted.

Below the illustrations was a ship’s price list advertising steep fares to depart from several different British ports. She set aside the paper and withdrew the last item from the box, a trade card with the name of a clockmaker in Glasgow.

She frowned and flipped the card, again recognizing Tilly’s scrawl. “*Become a new person, Rose. If you have the courage.*”

A new person? She narrowed her gaze, turning the card back. Who was this clockmaker, Mr. C. Liddle?

A disquieting thought began to take root. Was he someone who could do that? Make her a new person?

Gooseflesh rose along her skin despite the afternoon heat. Tilly confessed to growing up rough on the streets of Glasgow. Had she been acquainted with criminals? Someone . . . who could forge documents?

Her breath stilled. Had her friend imagined she would actually try and escape her wedding day to take on a new persona and sail to Canada?

The idea *was* insane, wasn’t it? Her heart thumped. *Freedom.*

She thought of Uncle then and his punishment to the boys if she

failed to marry.

Dropping the trade card onto the table, her agitated fingers reached for the chain still around her neck. She couldn't—wouldn't—jeopardize the lives of her brothers. Tilly had meant well, but she must go through with becoming Julien Dexter's wife—

Her fingers stilled on the chain. *Tilly's chain.*

An instant of horrifying clarity made her gasp; she'd forgotten to clock out yesterday in all her excitement, and then Griggs, the guard, had been distracted as he entered her ID number in his log. *Tilly's ID number.*

Shock waves coursed through her as she stared at the singed brooch lying on the table. It seemed certain her dear friend had been killed in the explosion, and likely—*Dear Lord!*—part of the carnage falling from the sky. That meant Luther, Uncle Ridley, Julien, the whole world would believe it was *she* who had died!

Rose reached for the kitchen wall to steady herself, grief and exhaustion mingling with a dangerous new hope. *Could* she become a new person?

She imagined her future as Lady Dexter, years of gradual decline into a beaten-down existence like that of Aunt Delia. And the boys—Uncle Ridley's threat to send her brothers to some far-off land by themselves if she didn't go through with the marriage.

But if the world thought she was dead . . .

Uncle would believe her gone to the grave and silenced forever. He'd have no reason to carry out his threat. But Douglas and Samuel, they would be devastated believing her dead. Surely she could not be that heartless.

What if she contacted them at their school? Told them she was alive

The loud rumble of a car outside drew her attention. Quickly, she re-pocketed the brooch, along with the bank note and the clockmaker's card before walking back into the parlor.

A familiar black Rolls-Royce pulled up outside. Luther!

The car looked battered, the passenger windows broken out. Once the engine died, the door opened and the tall, middle-aged frame of Miles Luther emerged, the top of his head bandaged.

He walked around the front of the car and headed toward the front door.

Rose wasted no time. Heart pounding, she scurried back to the kitchen and rushed out the back door, scooping up Winston in her

wake as she made for the shed. Once inside, she crawled beneath Tilly's overturned tub and prayed the dog in her arms would keep quiet.

Minutes passed like an eternity. Would Luther come out here to look for her? Winston gave a soft whine, and she scratched him behind his dirty ears to reassure him.

Another minute and the car's engine roared back to life. When the sound faded, she waited a bit longer before creeping out from beneath the tub with the dog. Trembling, she returned to the kitchen.

Her decision must be made.

Tilly was dead. Rose had also noticed the black armband on Luther's sleeve. A sickening sense of reality cramped her insides.

The advertisement for Nova Scotia still lay against the plaid tablecloth. She stared at the paper as she leaned against the kitchen wall, sliding toward the floor.

Do I have the courage? A bone-deep cry escaped from her lips, and Winston climbed into her lap, licking her sooty hands. Yet she barely noticed, aching over the loss of her dear friend and mourning the sorrow she would soon visit upon her young brothers.

Because, as of this moment, Rosalind Graham was dead.

3



LONDON

FRIDAY, JULY 5—FOUR DAYS LATER

Captain Alex Baird settled into one of the study's leather chairs and looked at his copper-haired friend, who had taken the seat beside him. "Well, Simon. I've had a rest, and your bonny wife's fed us a fine meal, so would you and Captain Weatherford care to tell me why I'm here?"

Captain Simon Forrester turned from Alex to consider the imposing man who had commandeered the desk. "Marcus?"

"I have an assignment, Captain Baird." Weatherford clasped his hands on the desktop and scrutinized him. "Though I'm still debating whether or not you're up to this particular task."

Alex shifted in his seat. He'd been wary when Simon's telegram arrived in the south of France two days ago. A request to attend an "unofficial meeting" in London. It meant cutting short his furlough, and yet he was glad for the chance to see Simon and his wife, Eve, again, since the three friends often became distanced by the war. Their cottage here in Highbury was also more to his liking, rather than a billet at one of the air bases.

Still, he had dreaded this day. The man behind the desk held his darkest secret, and Alex suspected it was time to pay up for the pact they'd made. "What's this assignment that has you doubting my abilities, Captain? I cut short my stay in Biarritz to travel all the way back to London. That should show some initiative."

"Yes, I imagine leaving behind the sunny beaches of southern France was a hardship." Weatherford's mouth curved beneath his dark mustache. "What I'm most concerned about, however, is your ability to separate any emotion from your sworn duty."

Was this about his brother Ian? Alex frowned. "I gave you my word." "I know you did, Alex." Weatherford spoke quietly. "But this is

different.”

Sensing Simon’s curiosity beside him, Alex kept his attention on Weatherford. Apparently, the captain had kept their secret even from his friend. “Different how?”

“I need you to travel to an air base in the north and receive your medical discharge—”

“Hold on!” Alex leaned forward. “Tis been twelve months since I took a furlough, so I may be a wee bit tired, but that doesna warrant a medical discharge.” He straightened. “I can get back into the cockpit whenever you like.”

“Rest assured, Captain, the medical discharge is merely a ruse.” Weatherford reached for a file on the desk. “There is an important reason you will be in Scotland. Critical, in fact.” His dark eyes leveled on Alex. “And before I say more, I’ll need your oath of confidentiality.”

“Scotland?” Anxiety rippled through Alex at the thought of returning home. A year had passed since he’d gone back with news of Ian’s death. The pain and guilt still gnawed at him. He glanced at Simon.

“Take the oath, man, so we can get on with it.”

Alex raised his right hand. “I swear it. Now please explain.”

He caught the silent exchange between Weatherford and Simon before his friend turned and said, “On Monday there was an explosion at a shell-filling factory in Nottingham.”

“I think I read about it in the newspaper when I arrived on the mainland.” Alex frowned as he tried to recall the headline: “‘60 Feared Dead in Midlands Factory Explosion.””

“Aye,” Simon said. “But with the war censorship, the real extent of the damage was kept from the public.” He glanced back toward the closed study door before he lowered his voice. “Half the complex was destroyed, and neighborhoods up to three miles away received damage. Over a hundred and thirty souls perished and only about thirty could be identified.” He shook his head. “Another two hundred and fifty were injured.”

Alex went still, staring at his friend. In four years of war, he’d seen his share of death and destruction across the battlefields of France. How sadly ironic that here in Britain such carnage also existed, and with innocent civilians.

“Scotland Yard and the Admiralty believe it was intentional.”

Weatherford’s bald statement drew his attention. “Sabotage? You have proof?”

He nodded. “Months ago, the French Secret Service investigated an

abandoned Paris flat, rented by the Greek arms dealer, Didymos Kahverengi. Among other aliases, Kahverengi is known to the press as the Merchant of Death.”

Alex’s thoughts raced. What did a medical discharge and Scotland have to do with him and an arms dealer?

“Kahverengi is suspected of selling weapons to the enemy. The French were looking for evidence.” Weatherford withdrew a document from the file. “What they found was unexpected.”

He held up a large photograph. “This is a picture of a charred scrap of paper the French discovered in the fireplace. It contains the names of four British munitions factories, and each has a number beside it. The first is the shell-filling factory, HM Barstow at Ludlum, with a number two. Then HM Factory Linworth at Devonshire with the number four. You already know of the third factory at Chilwell in Nottingham, marked with the number seven. And the fourth and last . . .” Weatherford gazed at him. “Moorside, listed with the number eight.”

At his grave expression, Alex drew a shallow breath. “Where is this place, Moorside?”

Simon’s hand came to rest on his shoulder. “*Moorside* is the government code name for the munitions plant, HM Factory Gretna—”

“No!” Alex jerked from his grasp. Gretna was home. The munitions factory . . . *Hannah*. “My sister works at that factory. She’s just fifteen, a bairn!”

“Easy, man.” Simon’s voice held calm. “Scotland Yard and MI5 have been in Gretna, investigating for months—”

“Months? And you didn’t tell me?” Alex growled under his breath. “And all this time my family’s been in danger.”

“We hoped to catch the saboteur long before he became a threat to Moorside, Captain.” Weatherford’s mouth bowed. “We even had people in place at Chilwell. However, our plan failed and now we must do all in our power to catch him inside Gretna’s factory.”

“Tell me more about this arms dealer.”

Weatherford offered him a dozen photographs from the file. Alex reviewed the faces of twelve different men. “Which one is Kahverengi?”

“Possibly all of them.”

He looked up, startled.

“Each of those men in the photographs was in the company of an identified foreign agent of the Central Powers. We suspect illegal

negotiations for arms. Kahverengi is known for using a variety of disguises.”

“And he’s the saboteur?”

“No, we believe he hired someone to do his dirty work. His agent is using either of two aliases, ‘Thomas Brown’ or ‘Rhymer.’ Both were written on the same charred list discovered in Paris.”

“And that’s it? You’ve nothing more to go on?”

“We have one key description from a reliable source,” Weatherford said. “Our saboteur has a birthmark—a port-wine stain above his hairline. He also has blue eyes and possibly dark hair and would now be thirty-two years old.”

“Who is this reliable source, Marcus?” Simon asked. “Can they provide my friend here with a few more details before he leaves for Scotland?”

“I’m afraid not. I can only say that the description is accurate.” Weatherford turned to Alex. “As Simon already stated, Scotland Yard has been working for months at each of the targeted factory sites. They’re interrogating all workers with either of the two names. So far, we’ve yet to come up with a person who meets the saboteur’s profile.”

“The numbers you mentioned listed beside each of the factories. What do they mean?”

“The month of the explosion.”

Chilwell had been marked with a number seven. The explosion happened just days ago, on the first of July. “And Moorside?”

“Number eight.”

August. Not even a month away. Alex stifled his agitation. “If this death merchant gets rich selling weapons, why would he want to blow up our munitions factories?”

“Why indeed?” Weatherford sighed. “We’re fairly certain the Germans hired him to destroy the factories and upset the balance of power. The Huns are losing ground in the war, and the kaiser is keen to get it back.

“Kahverengi also owns shares in the largest oil, steel, and chemical companies in Europe, many of which supply raw materials for our munitions here in Britain. When a factory explodes and production is halted, his stock drops with the sudden loss of demand, though we’ve noticed he’s the first to buy up any lower-priced shares. Once the factories recover and begin doubling their material output to make up for the loss, his stock—and his profits—soar.”

Alex snarled. “So the scunner gets rich while good people die.”

“Even more than that, I’m afraid.”

“What do you mean?”

“He wants to keep the war going, Alex.” Simon’s attention shifted to Weatherford. “Marcus?”

Weatherford leaned back in his seat. “The German Army grows tired, Captain. With the Americans now in the fight, an Allied victory is within our grasp. God willing, we’ll end this war before the year is out.”

“And that’s bad for business, pal.” Simon grimaced. “Especially if you’re an arms dealer.”

Alex eyed them both. “How does Kahverengi manage to evade the law? The devil buys and sells stock and negotiates arms deals, but you’re telling me he’s not been arrested?”

“So far his dealings appear legal, Captain,” Weatherford replied. “He’s also got plenty of lawyers and agents to handle his affairs. As for his selling arms to the enemy, we have pictures but we need solid proof. While the French actively seek to corroborate that, we must catch his agent, Rhymer, in the act. Once he’s arrested and made his confession, we’ll have grounds to bring Kahverengi into custody.”

“And that’s where you come in, Alex,” Simon said. “Because Hannah works at the factory and your family lives in Gretna Green, you’re the best choice for this assignment. You can get inside and find the saboteur without drawing undue attention.”

“And this sabotage could happen the first of next month?”

“Or any other day, Captain. Which is why we need to move on this now.” Weatherford rose to his feet. “Trust me when I say that MI5 and Scotland Yard are working continuously at Gretna. Moorside is the largest cordite factory in Britain, with four different sites encompassing miles. Each site runs three shifts, and there are other agents already inside, but you’ll be assigned to the site and shift we believe has the highest likelihood for sabotage. *Any* information you can glean will help our joint forces.” His dark eyes bore into Alex. “Will you take this assignment and do your sworn duty, Captain Baird?”

Sworn duty. Alex let his gaze drop to the stack of photographs. One of these men—the devil himself—jeopardized all he held dear. Not only Hannah’s life, but after learning the true extent of damage caused by the Chilwell explosion, his entire family was at risk. “*I’ll watch out for Ian, Maw, I’ll keep him safe . . .*”

The scars on his back throbbed with the memory of that promise. How could he protect any of them when he’d failed to save his

brother?

He glanced up at Weatherford. Their bargain was sealed a year ago, along with his brother's secret. And for that Alex was bound by another promise, not that he'd refuse such a mission when it was his own family in danger. "When do I leave?"

"First thing in the morning. RAF East Fortune is your final reassignment." Weatherford pushed an envelope across the desk. "You'll be discharged from service by the base commandant. As a civilian, you can obtain work at the factory."

He pierced Alex with a look. "Everything we do must appear by the book, understood? Until we know more about the intended sabotage, we cannot arouse suspicion. When you arrive at East Fortune, ask for Lieutenant Charles Stuart."

"Charles . . . Stuart?"

"Aye." Simon shot him a wink. "Marcus recruited the bonny prince himself."

"Stuart is working with MI5," Weatherford said, ignoring Simon's humor. "He'll be your liaison while you're working in Gretna. Once you arrive at the air base, Stuart will have your codebook so you can telegraph any information directly to him."

Weatherford collected his files and offered them to Alex. "I'm due back in Paris tomorrow, but you may borrow these tonight to study before your departure. If you have questions and cannot reach Lieutenant Stuart, Simon will act as my contact. Once you hire in at Moorside, you can also ask for any assistance from Mr. Arthur Timbrell." His eyes narrowed. "Remember, *by the book*. You must maintain security at all times."

Alex stood and reached across the desk. "You can count on me, Captain."

"Good." The two shook hands before Weatherford nodded to Simon. "I'll see myself out."

Simon also rose, and after their handshake Weatherford departed. Eve arrived at the study moments later with a tray of food. "I suppose Marcus didn't wish to stay for dessert?"

"Here, love, let me get that." Simon crossed the room and reached for the tray. After placing it on the desk, he helped his very pregnant wife into one of the leather wing-back chairs. "Where is Mrs. Kerr, wife? We hired her for good reason. I dinna want you exerting yourself, especially now."

Eve let out a satisfied groan as she settled into the chair. "She's

running an errand for me, Simon. Please, you needn't worry. I'm fine."

"You say that, but if you're not careful, Evelyn Forrester, you'll have the bairn right here on the study floor instead of at hospital next month."

Alex noted the growl in his friend's tone and knew Simon fashed over his wife. Unlike most, he kenned the hardships the couple had faced over the war years, after Simon's plane went down and he was believed dead.

But God had given them both a second chance at love, and he hoped with the new bairn his two friends would find the happiness they once dreamed about.

Eve reached for her husband's hand. "Truly, Simon, I am well. Anyway, how heavy can a few small bowls of apple charlotte be?"

"We're taking no chances."

At Simon's scowl, she leaned to press her cheek against his palm. "All right. No more trays."

"That's better."

Alex had averted his gaze but looked up to see Simon give her a peck on the cheek before turning to him. "Tuck in, pal. Eve does wonders with rationed flour and a bit of fruit."

"I dinna doubt it." Alex smiled at her and took a bowl, the smell of apples and cinnamon filling his nostrils. But his appetite waned.

In less than twenty-four hours, he would arrive in Scotland to begin his mission: to find the saboteur and save his family.

He considered his years in France; the countless preparations before flying a sortie against the Huns's Jasta squadrons, then the incessant waiting to take to the air to strike and perhaps escape his own demons.

Yet these next hours before boarding the train would seem the longest of his life.

4



Seated in HM Factory Gretna's hiring office midmorning on Friday, Rose made knots in her gloves while she awaited the interviewer. The drab gray walls and dingy paned windows across the room's vaulted ceiling seemed a contrast to the warm gold of the polished oak desk and swivel chair in front of her. A matching oak filing cabinet stood sentry near the door.

She still couldn't believe she was here. It seemed like weeks rather than just a few days since the explosion and her decision to assume Tilly's identity and disappear into Scotland.

The office door opened, admitting a thin, dark-haired woman. "Good afternoon. I'm Mrs. Nash, chief supervisor for the women's workforce here at the Site Three complex. And you must be—" she glanced at the folder in her hand—"Miss Tilda Lockhart?"

Rose launched from her seat. "Uh . . . yes, ma'am."

Her pulse raced as the middle-aged woman advanced on her. "I see my assistant, Miss Childers, brought you tea." She offered a perfunctory smile as she extended a hand in greeting.

"She did, thank you." Rose accepted the proffered welcome, then blushed as Mrs. Nash looked to the floor where the knotted gloves had fallen from Rose's lap.

Her smile softened. "Let's get started, shall we?"

Mrs. Nash returned to the tidy desk where she took up the swivel chair and donned a pair of eyeglasses. Sliding the rims upward along her hawkish nose, she reviewed what must be Rose's job application.

Collecting her gloves, Rose retook her seat, and it was several minutes before Mrs. Nash glanced up and removed the glasses. "I see you did not apply to us through the Labor Exchange, Miss Lockhart, which is irregular. Can you tell me what prompted your sudden decision to leave Nottingham's factory and come to HM Factory Gretna?"

Because I wanted my freedom. Rose pursed her lips against the truth and instead reached to finger Tilly's brooch, which she'd polished clean and now wore at her collar. The past few days were a blur of memories—fleeing her friend's cottage and taking the train north to Glasgow to visit *Mr. C. Liddle, Maker of Clocks*, a horrible man who had threatened to toss her bodily from his shop when she inquired about a new identity; then returning to her hotel to find a copy of the *Times* at the front desk and reading her own obituary.

Finally, her decision to pose as Tilly and leave Glasgow altogether after learning the munitions factory in Gretna was one of the largest in Britain, a place she could hide. "I know it all seems sudden, my coming here in person, ma'am," she said at last. "But I dearly wished to return to my homeland." *True enough.* "I've also lost someone dear to me when she died by . . ."

She'd almost blurted out Tilly's fate at Chilwell before thinking better of it. The *Times* had censored the truth, and it was doubtful Mrs. Nash knew the real devastation Rose had witnessed. *Black smoke and scorched earth. Carnage raining from the sky.*

She drew back her shoulders. "The truth is, ma'am, I need a fresh start. And I would like to continue my work for the war effort."

Her answer seemed to satisfy Mrs. Nash, who nodded in sympathy. "I am sorry for your loss, Miss Lockhart. This war has left many of us mourning our loved ones."

She slid the glasses back on and studied the application. "You state here that during your time at Chilwell, you supervised women filling shells inside the Pressing Room. How would you say they responded to you?"

"Remember, I grew up on the streets of Glasgow . . . not even the cheeky London lassies I oversee in the Pressing Room dare give me guff." Tilly's proud words, her smile, made Rose ache inside. Her friend had been so confident in handling her workers. Would she be able to do the same? "They respected me, ma'am." She shifted on the hard seat, voicing the words Tilly might say if she were in the room. "I believe in being fair, though I will not tolerate cheeky nonsense or misbehavior." From her own heart she added, "We all have our job to do, and the Tommies at the Front are counting on us."

"Excellent." Mrs. Nash beamed as she turned back to the application before her. "I see you are twenty-six years old." She looked up, her gaze thoughtful behind the spectacles.

"Is . . . that a problem?" Tilly had been five years older, and Rose

worried about the disparity in their ages. Would the lie she'd told on the application be discovered?

"No problem. In fact, you're older than most of our girls here at the factory." She said no more as she continued reading, and Rose sagged against the seat. Did she truly seem older? The notion warmed her despite her nervousness.

"Your manner of speech also tells me you've been educated." Mrs. Nash nudged the spectacles farther up the length of her nose. "How was that possible with your background at the orphanage?"

Rose pulled absently at the knots in her gloves. "At Ezekiel House we all received daily lessons from the staff, and when I left there I secured a post with an Englishwoman, Lady McAllister of the McAllisters of Perth."

"Oh? And what was your position?" Mrs. Nash eyed her curiously.

Rose hesitated. Tilly had told her she was an upstairs maid, but such a post would never justify her own boarding school diction. "I was fortunate enough to become her ladyship's personal companion," she said, improvising. "Lady McAllister took me under her wing and educated me in the use of good English and in the social graces."

"You were indeed blessed, Miss Lockhart."

Rose smiled, tasting the acrid lie on her tongue. Still, she plunged ahead with more of Tilly's past. "Her ladyship held property in both England and Scotland, and we often traveled back and forth. A few months ago she died in Nottingham. I chose to stay on and find work at the munitions factory there."

Compassion returned to Mrs. Nash's dark eyes. "The lost loved one you mentioned?"

"Yes," Rose squeaked, her guilt pressing her with the weight of a 155mm shell. Tilly was who she mourned, and now herself as well, yet there was no going back. Only misery awaited any return to Leicester.

Mrs. Nash asked several more work-related questions, which Rose answered as carefully as possible. Her relief mingled with uncertainty when the hawkish woman finally rose from behind the desk. "Miss Lockhart, I believe your qualifications would make you an asset to this establishment. One of our Women's Welfare shift supervisors was recently forced to leave due to a long-term illness, so pending a routine health examination, I'd like to offer you the post."

Mrs. Nash continued to relay to her the duties of the job while Rose only half listened, her pulse pounding. She was to begin her new life.

"Most of our workers are quite young, many barely sixteen years of

age,” Mrs. Nash said as she came around the desk. “You’ll be their chaperone of sorts during the shift, as well as keeping track of their work records and supervising their production on the factory floor.

“You should also be aware these girls come to us from all over the British Empire and from all walks of life.” Mrs. Nash crossed her arms over her thin chest, her gaze earnest. “They range from naïve, homesick young girls away from their families for the first time, to older, rougher girls from Dublin and London’s East End.” She paused. “We do keep a factory staff of policewomen on each shift to ensure order but pay particular attention to the more experienced girls. Make certain they do not abuse their break times, hiding away in the washrooms or bullying the younger girls.”

She smiled and relaxed her arms. “The pay is thirty-two shillings weekly with Sundays off. And as you’ve come from the factory in Nottingham, you know that the new hire paperwork process takes time. You’ll receive your first wages two weeks from today and then every Friday thereafter. Is this agreeable?”

Rose leaned back in her seat. Thirty-two shillings a week! More than she’d earned as a crane operator at Chilwell. And the terms were the same. “I gladly accept your offer, Mrs. Nash. Thank you.”

“Splendid. We’ll take a quick tour of the complex once you’ve signed off on the necessary papers and made a visit to the clinic.”

Rose watched her new supervisor retrieving documents from the filing cabinet. Her dream—Tilly’s dream—might actually come true!

Once Mrs. Nash returned to the desk, Rose left her chair, and after filling in the employment forms, she paused with the pen over the place she was to sign her name.

She worried her lower lip with her teeth. Once the deed was done, Tilly’s life would become her own. *If you have the courage.*

Her friend’s words were like a prayer in her heart as Rose signed the paper. Before she’d left the cottage in Attenborough, she made a promise to honor her dear friend—that she would earn enough to secure ship’s passage for herself and the boys, along with seed money to start a new life in Nova Scotia. Once they crossed the ocean, she and her small family would be free. She handed the signed paperwork back to Mrs. Nash. “When should I start?”

“The first shift begins tomorrow morning at six.” She handed Rose a booklet of rules and a tally disk similar to the one for Chilwell. “Use this temporary pass to enter and exit the factory. Your permanent pass will arrive once your application is processed.” She smiled. “Now, let’s

go to the clinic, and on the way you'll get to view your work section. Later, I'll introduce you to your new charges."

Nerves tingling, Rose followed Mrs. Nash out onto the factory floor, where she began to relax at the familiar noises of machinery and seeing young women clad in khaki trousers, tunics, and bonnets. She also noted one or two of the policewomen her supervisor had mentioned.

Yet she saw none of the TNT shells she'd once loaded at Chilwell. "Where is your Pressing Room?"

"We do not fill shells at this facility, Miss Lockhart. We manufacture the propellant, cordite." Her voice exuded pride. "Our factory is the largest producer in Great Britain."

Rose observed in one area a series of shallow vats, waist-high and mounted on tables, and young workers standing and kneading by hand some kind of doughy mixture.

"The girls are mixing the cordite paste, popularly known around here as the 'devil's porridge.'" Mrs. Nash had followed her gaze as they paused to watch the process. "A combination of nitroglycerine and nitrocotton is used to make the cordite strands inside bullet cartridges." She glanced at Rose. "And this will be your new area, and your office is over there." She turned and indicated a closed door near the entrance into the section.

Her own office? Rose lifted a brow. It seemed already her life had changed!

As they continued on, Mrs. Nash indicated an opened roll-up warehouse door leading into another part of the site. "Both the niter stores and cotton stores are that way. Our girls use hooks with block and tackle to bring in five-hundred-pound bales of cotton to break them down for processing."

She pointed to a door on the opposite side. "You'll also oversee girls working in the Acids Room, where they mix the chemicals used to make the nitroglycerin and the nitrocotton for cordite. Both men and women test the finished acids for their proper weight and density." Her face sobered as she glanced at Rose. "Make no mistake, Miss Lockhart, this is very delicate work. Any misstep can be fatal, as you well know having worked in Chilwell."

When Rose blinked, Mrs. Nash said, "The newspapers were vague, but word spreads quickly among munitions factories." Her brown eyes softened. "It comes as no surprise why you would wish to have a fresh start."

Rose was grateful for her supervisor's understanding. Yet would she

be able to handle such an important position?

"Your charges know their jobs, Miss Lockhart," Mrs. Nash went on, reading her concern. "They'll help you to gain your footing here, and I am always available whenever you need."

"Thank you."

They soon arrived at the clinic, and after a basic medical examination, Rose was declared fit. Pleased, Mrs. Nash led her toward the canteen. "It's break time now, so most of the girls on day shift will be having their tea."

Rose marveled at the size of the complex. "And this is all just one site?"

Mrs. Nash nodded. "We have three other site buildings, each with its own function to produce the finished cordite. They all interconnect through our own factory railroad system."

Certainly large enough! She followed her new supervisor into the canteen, noting rows upon rows of khaki-clad girls seated along either side of long wooden tables, laughing, talking, and enjoying tea.

"These young women work the day shift here at Site Three, but I'll take you to the table with the girls from your particular section."

Once they'd stopped at the farthest table, Mrs. Nash clapped her hands. "Ladies!"

A hush came over the canteen while hundreds of pairs of eyes turned in their direction.

"You girls in the nitroglycerin section, this is Miss Lockhart, your new supervisor. She will start tomorrow, and I want full cooperation and your best work for her, is that understood?"

Some of the girls at the table nodded and gave her friendly smiles while the rest looked on in curiosity. Each wore the same styled bonnet and uniform, and Rose's heart raced at wondering how she would begin to supervise so many of them.

Her breathing eased when only five rose from their seats. Sarah, Jane, Dorothy, Millie, and Hannah introduced themselves, and Rose noticed each girl spoke a different dialect.

Mrs. Nash had said they came from all over Britain. Rose smiled. "I'm very pleased to meet you, girls." But as she spoke, she became aware of the three workers nearest her at the table, glancing up at her, then at one another and sharing a smirk.

Were these the rougher girls Mrs. Nash warned her about? Relieved she wouldn't have to deal with them, Rose returned her gaze to the five girls still standing. None of them looked over the age of seventeen, and

most had Tilly's same sallow complexion. "I look forward to our working together, ladies, and I will appreciate your help in learning more about your section and the work each of you accomplishes here."

One of the three workers at the end sniggered. Mrs. Nash frowned. "Miss Gladys Dunham, you will cease with your rudeness or I'll fine you for misbehavior." She stared at the other two. "Miss Colleen Shire, Miss Betty Pierce, that goes for you as well."

With their wages threatened, all three looked up at Mrs. Nash before turning to reassess Rose. At length the one called Gladys smiled tightly. "Miss Lockhart."

Were these three under her supervision then? "I hope we shall all get on well together," Rose said, and prayed it would be true as she kept her smile in place.

Finally she turned to Mrs. Nash. "Can you tell me what kind of housing is available?"

"Oh, I apologize, we should have covered that in the office. There is a current shortage for supervisory staff housing, and most of these girls live in Timber Town, the wooden barracks-styled huts you saw coming in on the train. They were built for our factory workers." She hesitated. "You might try in town, or if you wish, I can make arrangements for your temporary use of one of the girls' hostels."

Her strained smile suggested Rose think twice about moving into the same dormitory with her new charges. Nor could she, considering her present circumstance. "Thank you for the kind offer, but I do have a suitable room at the Gretna Hotel." Though now she worried how long she could remain there. Between four nights of hotel accommodations—two in Glasgow searching out that wretched clockmaker and then last night and tonight here in town, along with travel and meals—she'd already spent half of Tilly's generous five-pound note.

Mrs. Nash had said she wouldn't receive her first wages until Friday after next. That was two whole weeks away. "Perhaps I shall find a cottage rental in town."

"That's certainly possible." Her supervisor brightened. "And I will let you know of any vacancies for staff housing at once."

After completing the rest of her orientation, the lunch whistle sounded. Mrs. Nash bid her farewell, with Rose's promise to arrive for work promptly at six o'clock the following morning.

She soon departed the complex and stood on the platform with others who waited for the special factory train to return them to town.

Rose was excited to begin her new job and her new life. She just

prayed she could measure up to Tilly's courage and strength enough to succeed.

5



Miss Lockhart? May I join you?"

Standing on the crowded platform, Rose glanced at the amber-eyed young woman who seemed hesitant to approach. She couldn't quite place the girl, who looked pretty in her pleated white blouse and clean but worn charcoal skirt that complimented her reddish-blond hair.

She shifted aside to make room. "Of course."

The train arrived then, and the two quickly stepped aboard and took their seats. The girl sat across from her, offering a shy smile. "You likely dinna recognize me without my uniform. I'm Hannah Baird."

"Hannah, yes, I remember you from the canteen." Rose paused. "Are you already finished with work?"

The girl shook her head. "I sometimes take my lunch at home." She wore a soft blush. "Tis only ten minutes from the Gretna platform, and my maw and da get a break from the wee 'uns when I'm there."

A thoughtful girl. Rose smiled. "I am certain your mother and father appreciate it."

"I suppose." Then she burst out, "Och, I'm so glad you're the new supervisor, Miss Lockhart! Mrs. Finch was our last, and she was auld and strict and she never smiled. She wasna modern at all." Hannah appraised Rose's costume with admiration. "Your jacket is just the color of heather and cut so fashionable, and your matching skirt shows off your ankles. 'Tis so modern!"

"Thank you." Rose hid a smile. "How old are you, Hannah?"

"Fifteen, but my birthday's in a couple of weeks. I was just promoted to work inside the factory. Before that, I cleaned the workers' rooms in Timber Town."

"Do you still live at home?"

"Aye." Her ebullient mood faded. "Maw and Da say they need me at the house, but I want to live at the huts with my friends!" She pushed out her lower lip. "I'm not allowed to do anything on my own and I'm

tired of being treated like a bairn.” Her earnest gaze sought Rose. “I’m almost sixteen. And I have an important job inside the factory!”

Rose nodded, understanding Hannah’s growing pains. Hadn’t she experienced her own at that age? Always under the eye of the boarding school mistress, or at Leicester with her uncle and his paid spies, like Luther, his latest “sheepdog.”

In the years since her parents died, neither she nor her brothers had ever been allowed to waver in their behavior—always proper, polite, resigned. Never recognized as the lost children that they were.

Rose pulled at the knots in her gloves. She had been the instrument of her uncle’s power, groomed as wife to a man of his choosing. It still seemed impossible she’d broken free. If she hadn’t, tomorrow she’d be walking down the aisle to meet Julien.

“Miss Lockhart? You look a bit peely-wally, white as Maw’s washing. Are you well?”

“I’m fine.” Rose shoved away her morose thoughts, relieved when the train began moving. Once she returned to the hotel, she’d ask at the front desk for any recommendations of rentals to suit her circumstances. She eyed the pretty girl across from her. “Tell me about your family, Hannah. You mentioned little ones. You have brothers and sisters?”

“I’m the only lassie, but I’ve got two younger brothers at home. Fergus is ten, and James is just six.”

Douglas and Samuel were close to the same ages. Rose swallowed and said, “Being the eldest, I imagine that you stay busy with them.”

“They’re a handful.” Hannah grinned. “But I’ve an aulder brother—well, he’s my half brother from Da’s first marriage. Alex is twenty-eight and he’s handsome and a captain with the RAF, fighting in the war.”

“A real hero, then.”

“Aye, he’s a hero and I love him so much!” Her radiant face clouded. “We also had another brother, Ian. He’d be twenty-two next month if he hadna died when his plane went down in France last year.”

Not much older than me. Rose’s heart went out to her. “I’m sorry. I lost both of my parents when the city bus crashed. I was just fourteen, near your age when your brother died.”

Hannah leaned forward, rapt with curiosity. “Do you have brothers and sisters?”

Realizing she’d slipped into her own history instead of Tilly’s, Rose averted her eyes to the train’s open window. Tilly’s mother died birthing her, and her father perished in a Glasgow dock accident when

she was still just a child.

So what do I do now? Rose pursed her lips, turning back to the girl. It was too late to change her story. She'd have to muddle through. "I had a brother . . . once, but he died very young, and so I was sent to the orphanage . . ."

Why in heaven's name had she said that when Tilly's brother had died long after their parents, somewhere overseas? *Because you don't want Hannah asking you any more questions, that's why.*

"Your brother died and so did mine."

Hannah's commiserating tone stabbed at her conscience. Rose started to agree, then stopped herself. Even she couldn't bear to commit such hypocrisy.

"So . . . you've no family left at all, Miss Lockhart?"

Rose shrugged as more guilt pressed her. "It is not so terrible being alone."

"Och, now I'm certain my decision was the right one."

"What decision?" Rose hoped their current topic was at an end.

"I confess, Miss Lockhart, I had a reason to meet you on the train. When Mrs. Nash told you there was no staff housing, I wanted to . . ." The girl fidgeted with her work-roughened hands. "We've an extra room at our house. I'm sure Maw and Da would welcome you to stay with us."

Rose's hopes lifted at the girl's generous offer. Already she'd planned to settle her hotel bill, at least through Saturday, and then pray she could find something workable. Still . . .

"Hannah, truly, I am grateful for what you propose, but I would not wish to be a burden on your parents—"

"You wouldna be a burden!" Hannah's head shot up, color rising in her cheeks. "What I mean to say is . . . we'd welcome a boarder."

The girl's family needed the funds. Rose wavered. It was imperative she find an affordable place to live as soon as possible, but there was her particular circumstance to deal with. She laid a hand over Hannah's. "I would be very glad to speak with your parents about an arrangement, but there is something you must see before I agree."

The train had slowed as it drew up to the platform, and minutes later the workers disembarked, some of them heading in the direction of Timber Town while the rest dispersed toward Gretna's village. "Follow me," Rose instructed once they alighted, and they struck out in the direction of the hotel.

"Where did you work before, Miss Lockhart?"

Rose glanced at the girl, careful to weigh her words this time. “A few hours south of here by train.”

“England then.” Hannah sighed. “I wish my maw and da would let me go to England—or any place besides Gretna.” She cast a beseeching look at Rose. “Some of my friends from the factory got permission to take the train into Carlisle tomorrow night. On Saturdays, the cinemas there have exciting, romantic films, not like the dull pictures shown here.”

Rose offered another sympathetic nod, while a sudden yearning caught her unaware as she realized the care and protection Hannah’s parents exercised over their only daughter. They wanted her living at home rather than apart from them in the hostels; and because of her tender years, they showed prudence in limiting her freedom to run about the countryside unchaperoned.

She’d once known that kind of love. Rose and her baby brothers, basking in the doting affection of their parents, all living cozy in the small Edinburgh flat above Graham’s Drapers and Haberdashery. A lifetime ago.

Reaching the hotel, she turned her thoughts to the possibility of living with the Bairds. Rose imagined she would like Hannah’s family. “My room is on the second floor, so we’ll take the stairs.”

Arriving at her door, she fitted the key and as she turned the lock, a familiar yip greeted her. “You’ve a wee dog!” Hannah said, rushing inside to the crate on the floor beside the bed.

“Hannah, meet Winston. The reason that I doubt your parents will agree to have me as their boarder.” Rose was grateful the hotel proprietor had indulged her, letting her keep Winston in the room for a few days.

“He’s braw!” The girl crouched beside the crate, and when Winston issued a growl, she scurried back to land on the floor.

“Winston, you will show some manners.” Rose marched over to collect the dog, then sat on the bed with him.

Hannah rose to her feet and took a hesitant step forward. “Will he bite?”

Rose shook her head. “Winston likes to think he is fierce, but just hold out your hand so he can get your scent. Then give his ears a good scratch and he’ll be your friend forever.”

Soon Hannah was cradling the dog on the bed. “His fur is so white and soft,” she murmured. “Have you had him long?”

“Just a short while.” Again the memories lanced her heart—arriving

at the cottage on Tilly's bicycle and finding Winston, muddy and stinking of pig slop as he sped past her into the house. Her quick pursuit and then being tossed in the air as the explosion changed her world.

It had been a mistake to bring the dog. Caring for an animal was an added burden when she had no idea about her own future. Yet beneath her logic was a need to hold on to Tilly. Her friend would want her to care for her beloved companion.

Even Winston had sensed her waffling. Shortly after his bath at the cottage, his very soft and white self sat up on hind legs, his pink tongue lolling to one side of his mouth. His appeal had charmed her then, but the dog soon became a balm to her loneliness and grief. She'd clung to that last remaining thread connecting her to the sister of her heart.

"You'll make a fine friend to the laddies at home."

Hannah's crooning drew her back, and she smiled watching the girl scratch behind one furry ear and then the other while Winston grinned up at her.

No doubt he'd charm the Bairds, too. "Have you any pets at home, Hannah?" Even if the girl's family agreed to lodge her and the dog, how would Winston interact with another animal?

"We had a small collie, Tinker. He was Da's dog and followed him to work each day at the train yard. Tinker was ten when he ran to catch up with Da and got hit by the water truck." She gazed up at Rose. "That happened three weeks after my brother's memorial." She bent her head, scratching the dog's ear. "So I think Winston will be a welcome member to our family."

Her soft words held sadness but with a perception that impressed Rose. There was more to young Hannah Baird than her shy smile and adolescent frustrations. "Then shall we go and speak with your parents, so you can return to work?"

"Aye." Hannah rose from the bed and set the dog gently back inside his crate.

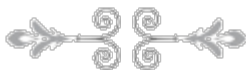
They soon set a quick pace along the dirt track leading back toward the Green. As they walked, Rose continued to harbor doubts over the Bairds' reception of her and Winston.

To fifteen-year-old Hannah, everything in life held possibility. Rose had experienced the same sense of promise near that age until she'd lost her parents. Yet even after Aunt and Uncle arrived to collect them in Scotland, hiring a nanny to take her baby brothers in hand, Rose grieved her loss and still held hope their lives would be all right. That

under their aunt's tender care they could eventually become a family again.

She'd been so wrong.

"There it is!" Hannah pointed to a large white cottage trimmed in black and nestled among a narrow woodland of leafy birches and pines. The house sat back a good distance from the road, and as they trekked down the long dirt drive, Rose prayed Hannah's instincts were correct and that she and Winston would be welcome.



"Och, ye may have the extra room, of course." Mrs. Baird's broad smile matched her husband's as Rose took tea with the couple in their comfortable parlor.

Hannah stayed long enough to introduce "Miss Lockhart" and tell her parents she was orphaned, newly arrived from England to take a job as shift supervisor, and in need of housing. Then the breathless girl grabbed an apple and a potato pasty from the kitchen before dashing back to work.

Seated beside Hannah's mother on the large blue couch, Rose reached toward the table for a jam biscuit and her steaming cup of tea. "I am grateful to you both for the offer, but are you certain about Winston? I would not wish to cause any difficulties."

"Yer wee dog is welcome." Mrs. Baird's amber eyes, so much like her daughter's, glowed from her pleasantly rounded face. She turned to her husband seated in the chair across from them, resting his hands on the top of his cane. "'Tis long enough since our own Tinker's passing, and the laddies will love having another dog to chase them around."

"Winston and I have not been together long, but he has proven to be housebroken and very smart. He likes to growl upon first meeting, but once he knows you and you reward him with a good scratching, he's as gentle as a lamb."

"Sounds a bit like our Tinker." Mr. Baird chuckled, glancing at his wife. He turned a warm smile on Rose. "I'm sure you both will be a fine addition to the family."

Family. Rose liked the inclusive words he spoke and the way he eyed her with a fatherly expression. A sense of warmth and rightness settled over her as she sipped her tea, and the hope she could afford to stay with these good people.

“Please excuse the brew. ’Tis a bit watery.” Mrs. Baird looked apologetic. “What with the war on and having to ration here in Scotland.”

“The tea is fine.” Rose smiled. “And they ration down in England too.”

Mrs. Baird’s expression eased, and Rose set her teacup back onto the table. She looked to Hannah’s father. “Mr. Baird, what do you normally charge your tenants?”

He chuckled. “You’re the first, lass. We’ve not had one before.” He looked at his wife. “Mairi?”

Mrs. Baird paused with her teacup halfway to her lips. “The room belongs to our auldest son, Alex. He’s still over in France with the war, so he willna be home anytime soon.” Then without taking a sip she set down the cup, her features pinched.

Hannah had told her that their younger son, Ian, died a year ago in France. Certainly, Mrs. Baird worried for her stepson.

Rose remained silent, allowing them a private moment of grief. She absently reached for the thistle brooch at her collar before she finally cleared her throat. “What would you propose then as a monthly fee? I will pay whatever you think is fair and what I can afford, of course.” When the couple shared a bemused look, she stood. “I’ll give you a few minutes.”

Rose walked outside onto the front porch. As she scanned the fields beyond the woodland, she observed green pastureland, with a few dark cattle grazing openly and a herd of sheep on the next farm over. Most of Gretna was flat that she could see, unlike her childhood city of Edinburgh, built upon hills. And the heat wasn’t nearly as intense here as it was in Nottingham days ago.

When Mrs. Baird called her back inside, Rose thrilled to learn the couple had settled on an amount for room and board that she could afford. “I can pay you for half the month now, and the rest once I receive my wages on the nineteenth. Would that be acceptable?”

“Aye, ’tis just right.” Mrs. Baird smiled. “And I can send my lad, Fergus, along to help with yer luggage.”

“That is kind, Mrs. Baird, but I can have the hotel bring me around in the carriage.” After the explosion, Rose had little in the way of possessions—nothing more than the filthy clothes on her back and the thistle brooch. She’d packed Tilly’s valise with a few of her friend’s clothes, including the Sunday jacket and skirt she’d worn to the interview—and Tilly’s birth certificate. Of course, Winston too, after

she'd given him a good scrubbing.

Once she paid the funds from her small purse, Rose offered Mrs. Baird her hand. "I shall return this afternoon. Thank you both again for taking me in."

"We're glad to have you, lass." Mr. Baird leaned on his cane to rise to his feet, and he and Mrs. Baird walked her to the door.

With a backward wave at them, Rose returned to the hotel, eager to collect Winston and settle into her new home.

6



EAST FORTUNE, SCOTLAND SATURDAY, JULY 6

He dreaded going home.

Alex's gut tightened as he stared from the train's open window at the familiar terrain of Scotland's East Lothian valley. He again considered his meeting with Weatherford and Simon last night. Though he was impatient to hunt down the saboteur who had threatened Moorside and his family, what would he say to his maw and da when they all finally came face-to-face?

He'd been devastated, witnessing his brother's burial in France last year, but then coming home to Gretna to watch his family grieve at Ian's memorial had nearly crippled him. He had absorbed their suffering, as he must for what he'd done—or rather, what he'd failed to do. His parents, oblivious to anything but their own sorrow, barely acknowledged his presence, while Hannah sobbed uncontrollably and Fergus and James looked more lost than aggrieved to know their brother was dead.

You shouldna have hunted him down. Better to have let him go. His gaze fell to the RAF uniform cap in his hands, and he ran an absent finger along the starched seam.

He and his brother had both been fascinated with the idea of man-made flight. Ian enlisted in the Royal Flying Corps when he was of age, and with Alex's help received his flight training at Dover. Afterward he joined him at Saint-Omer Air Base in northern France, where as a flight commander Alex could keep an eye on his younger brother.

With turnover rates high and pilots in constant demand, Ian found himself called up to engage in one sortie after the next, yet he'd proved his mettle, taking down a total of five Jasta fighter planes in the short time before his death.

With those five, he'd reveled in attaining his status as "flying ace." He also found an adoring audience in Paris on furlough weekends, where he'd spend his pay gambling and buying drinks for questionable women. Women like Olivia Charles.

The muscles in Alex's neck tightened. If Weatherford ever managed to find the traitorous witch, it would be his own good pleasure to sit in on her trial and execution.

Seducing his brother for her own gain, she'd been the one to cause Ian's disgrace. And she didn't work alone; that scunner, Dexter, put her in Ian's path, then helped his brother with his naïve and deadly plan . . .

The train slowed, and Alex glanced toward the window as the station platform came into view. At 1730 hours, the air was warm, the afternoon sun still hovering high above the trees.

On the nearest side of the station building, a man in the new olive-green uniform of the RAF stood beside a military truck as if awaiting his arrival. Was this his MI5 contact, Lieutenant Charles Stuart?

Disembarking minutes later, Alex replaced his cap and saw the man hailing him.

Not a lieutenant.

"Captain Baird!" The young airman approached and offered a smart salute.

Alex returned it. "Cadet . . . ?"

"Patrick Donovan, sir. 'Tis an honor having ye here. A real honor." His boyish face flushed with color as he reached for Alex's valise. "I'll drive ye tae the base in a shake, Captain. Our commandant's waiting tae meet ye."

Alex raised an amused brow at the red-faced lad. "Lead the way, Cadet."

Once they boarded, the truck set out and minutes later arrived at the gate into RAF East Fortune. Alex caught the briny smell of the North Sea blowing in off the coast, and he surveyed the expanse of landing fields, flat green pasture mown short for the planes.

An array of tents and brown Nissen huts stood at the far side of the landing field, and beyond the buildings to the north were three enormous canvas structures.

"Those house the big airships, sir." Donovan followed his gaze. "We've been using them tae clobber the Hun U-boats swimmin' out at sea."

"I was told this airfield's now a training base for pilots?"

“Aye, sir. For planes and airships.” Again, his fair complexion colored. “I’m just a pilot in training right now, but I’ve got meself some grand plans.”

Alex cast him a sidelong glance. “Perhaps a wing command of your own one day, Donovan?”

“Indeed, sir!” His shoulders straightened as he wheeled the truck past the gate.

Alex smiled at his enthusiasm, recalling the thrill of his own flight through the ranks. “I wish you the best of luck, Cadet. And remember, always keep a steady hand on the stick and your eyes everywhere.”

“Thank ye, sir!” Donovan gazed at him wide-eyed as though Alex had just shared with him some ancient world secret. The airman parked the truck in front of a green block building and killed the engine. “This is HQ, Captain, and the place we call home. If ye’ll follow me, sir, I’ll take ye tae see the colonel.”

Donovan grabbed up Alex’s single piece of luggage and led the way into the RAF squadron offices. Inside at the first doorway, a young corporal sat transmitting messages on his telegraph machine. Farther down the hall, in another makeshift office, a woman in uniform clacked away on a typewriter. Passing two more rooms with closed doors, Alex and his guide arrived at the office of the base commandant, Lieutenant Colonel Landon.

The aulder officer sat at his desk. He glanced up from his paperwork and rose to his feet. “Ah, please come in, Captain Baird. We’ve been waiting for you.”

“Colonel.” Alex nodded. He cast a quick glance at Donovan. “Of course, sir, you know the reason I’m here—”

“That will be all, Cadet Donovan.” The colonel raised a gnarled hand toward Alex to stay any further conversation. “Do be sure to close the door on your way out.”

“Aye, sirs.”

Once Donovan left, the colonel turned sad eyes on Alex. “I was heartily sorry to hear that I’m to be the one to sign off on your discharge papers, Captain Baird. Especially when we are in great need of skillful, seasoned pilots such as yourself.” He picked up a file from the desk. “I confess the proof of your fine reputation as an ace and a flight commander has preceded your arrival.”

Alex bowed his head, shifting his stance. “Thank you, sir. Leaving the RAF . . . ’tis not a situation I’d expected.”

“No, of course not.” The colonel nodded. “However, I understand

this aeroneurosis business to be quite serious and requires much rest.” He smiled beneath a salt-and-pepper mustache. “And you, my boy, have done more than your share to deserve the chance to heal.” He reached for another set of papers. “Once our typist finishes up the final forms, you and I shall sign them, and you can be off whenever you like.”

Alex didn’t like one wee bit of it. Nor did he care for the aeroneurosis malady Weatherford had cooked up. He’d been tired lately, aye, but not with the headaches or jitters typical of pilots who had flown in one too many dogfights.

“Everything by the book.” Weatherford’s orders. And so he must be seen to leave the service before seeking out a civilian job at Moorside.

“While the paperwork is being readied, Captain, I imagine you’d like to freshen up after your journey. You shall have a temporary billet in the instructors’ tent, which is at your disposal until you can depart for home. In Gretna, correct? Of course it is.” The colonel’s brows knitted together as he nodded, having answered his own question. “I suspect it’s why the RAF brass wanted you discharged here at East Fortune.”

“Actually, sir, I’m also here to see a . . . a pal. Lieutenant Charles Stuart? Can you tell me where I might find him?”

“Ah yes, Lieutenant Stuart. He’s the new chap we are expecting tomorrow.”

Tomorrow? Alex frowned. “I’d hoped he would be here by now.”

“My office received a call earlier. The lieutenant had to arrange a flight over from France this afternoon and missed the last train out of Victoria Station. He plans to get a lift on an early morning supply train, which should arrive—” he checked his watch—“about midday tomorrow. In the meantime, you’re welcome to remain at the base.”

More delays. Alex worked his jaw. “Thank you, sir.”

“I shall ring for Cadet Donovan to take you to your billet.” He picked up the telephone, then paused to regard Alex. “Since you will be here a while longer, Captain, once you’ve settled, please come to the mess hall for supper. It’s 1800 hours, so most of the men should be there.”

Again he thanked the colonel, and once Donovan arrived, Alex walked with the cadet toward the instructors’ quarters, his mood wavering between impatience to track down the saboteur and relief at postponing his homecoming.

Either way, he must wait. Stuart had the codebook, and Alex wanted to glean from his new MI5 liaison any added information about his quarry at Moorside.

They neared the tents, and once more his gaze swept across the RAF post. Standard-sized plane hangars stood across the field from the airship structures, and beyond them Nissen huts likely used to house fuel or weapons and the airfield's repair facilities. East Fortune was set up much like his former base at Saint-Omer in France, only on a much smaller scale.

Inside the canvas instructors' tent, Alex was relieved to find the place empty. Donovan set his valise on one of the lower bunks and stepped back. "I can wait, sir, and take ye over tae the mess." He stood at attention, his face once more a rosy hue. "All the lads heard ye were coming in today and they're keen tae make yer acquaintance."

Despite the invitations to sup, Alex was in no humor for company. Still, he didna have the heart to refuse the cadet. "Just point me in the right direction, Donovan. I'll be there. What's tonight's fare?"

"The same as every night, sir. Tinned beef with neeps and tatties." Donovan made a face. "We call 'em turnips and potatoes in Ireland, but they taste the same wherever ye go."

"Too bad the tinned beef isn't haggis." Alex smiled. "Then every night could be a meal my fellow Scots Rabbie Burns would approve."

"Aye, sir." Grinning, Donovan relaxed his stance, then pointed back toward the tent opening. "Ye'll take a right once ye return tae the green building, and the mess is the Nissen hut around back." Excitement lit his face. "I'll let the lads know ye'll be stopping by."

After the cadet went in search of his supper, Alex put his valise on the floor and flopped down onto the thin mattress. Staring into the upper bunk's framework, he anticipated his meeting tomorrow with Stuart. How much could the man tell him about Scotland Yard and MI5's efforts to identify this saboteur, Thomas Brown or Rhymer?

Weatherford believed both names were one and the same man working for the death merchant, Kahverengi. And with a common name like Thomas Brown, the joint investigation must have already interrogated hundreds of men in the factories, checking each for a red birthmark. A slow process to be sure, and one that made him more anxious to get inside Moorside to begin his search.

He checked his watch. Fifteen minutes had already passed. His stomach rumbled, and so he rolled off the bunk, cleaned up a bit at the washstand, and headed over to the mess.

"Captain Baird!" Donovan beamed, rising from his chair at a long table filled with cadets. Alex nodded, then glanced across the room to the instructors' table with Colonel Landon at its head. The colonel

smiled and waved him toward the young lads staring at him as though he were some god.

Alex fetched his food and returned to the cadet's table, where Donovan quickly pulled out the empty chair beside him. Settling next to the Irishman, he was amused and humbled at the battery of questions he received from the cadets. Some were fresh young lads, while others were aulder officers who had transferred in from other military branches to become pilots.

They asked about his flight career, how many kills—thirty-five—and how the fighting was going in France. As he responded to each question, he considered them, knowing once they left East Fortune as “finished pilots” and went overseas, very few would return.

Colonel Landon had said it earlier—the RAF was desperate for experienced pilots, as they were always in short supply. These lads not only risked death during training accidents, but if they made it as far as France, only the best and bravest would survive the Huns' experienced Jasta fighters.

And Ian. *Yours was such a senseless loss, brother.*

“Captain Baird, will you be instructing us now that you're here?”

Alex turned to a young lad dressed in the auld khakis of the Royal Flying Corps. “Well, Cadet . . .”

“Peterson, sir.”

“I willna be here long enough to do any instructing, Peterson. I'm going home to see my family tomorrow.”

Peterson's expression fell, and the table grew quiet.

Alex surveyed the downcast faces. “But if I was ever to train with you lads, I'd be honored.” Satisfied at the return of their smiles, he chose the moment to stand and leave them. “Then I'll see you all in the sky?”

Several heads nodded as they wished him well, and he strode toward the colonel, who waited for him at the door.

“The typed forms are ready whenever you are.”

Alex followed him back to the office, and once all was signed, the colonel gave him his walking papers. “Good luck to you, Captain Baird. I hope that by returning home you can make a complete recovery. And when you do, and if this blasted war continues, we would be pleased to have you return and instruct our cadets.”

“I appreciate the offer, Colonel.”

“You must be tired. If you wish to return to your billet, you'll have a chance to meet the instructors, perhaps some of whom you may have

known in France.”

Back as his tent, Alex did recall two of the pilots. Captains Carlson and Murphy had served out of the same airfield at Saint-Omer and flew sorties with his squadron. The three regaled one another with tales of various dogfights until it was finally time for lights-out.

Alex stared into the darkness, his head throbbing with exhaustion. Was the aeroneurosis Weatherford put into his file a possibility? He began massaging his temples, and minutes later, blessed sleep overtook him.

Both planes flew at high speeds, and adrenaline pumped in his veins. Gripping the stick, he angled his Sopwith Camel to come up around behind the single-seat Sopwith Pup streaking across the sky. He pushed the throttle to inch his plane forward, then alongside the left wing of the Pup—before he ducked, quickly easing back as the sun glinted off the steel revolver aimed at him from the other plane. A shot fired.

Ian, did I not tell you that woman was bad business? You’re going to die, lad!

Still he kept his brother in his sights as they neared the Belgian border. He prayed they didn’t meet up with an enemy squadron of Jastas before he could get Ian on the ground.

But fail or succeed, his brother was dead to him. Desertion, a court-martial offense, meant a military tribunal. A firing squad.

He ground his teeth, perspiration beading along the edge of his flight cap despite the freezing wind. Dear God, why had he not stopped seeing her? Now Ian had gone too far.

Suddenly the Pup made a dive, trying to shake him off. He pushed the stick forward, and the nose of his plane followed like two enemy pilots ready to dogfight. Nearing the ground in the northwest corner of France—territory still heavily occupied by the enemy—the Pup continued downward while he wrenched back on his stick to level out.

Ian, pull out! He watched, helpless, as the plane spiraled out of control. The Pup crashed in a clearing surrounded by trees, and he ruthlessly jerked on the controls, bringing his plane around to make a sketchy landing near the wreckage. His wheels touched down on uneven ground, the plane bouncing back and forth, and he struggled to keep control. When he finally came to a stop, he vaulted from the cockpit, running toward the blaze with every scrap of air in his lungs.

He knelt beside the still form, his brother’s flight cap gone and exposing his dark hair. Pulling off his own leather jacket, he grabbed Ian, shielding himself from the flames as he pulled his brother from the fire. He staggered

with him several feet before the fuel ignited in a final explosion, knocking him and his burden to the ground.

Seconds passed while he struggled to rise, and then he tried to rouse his brother. Wake up! Wake up . . .

“Wake up, Captain.”

The gentle nudge at his shoulder jolted Alex from sleep. He lay on his back, his undershirt soaked through with sweat.

“You look as if you’ve been to the devil’s house and back, Captain Baird.”

Again the low voice beside him. Alex blinked and turned to the shadowy figure crouched alongside his bunk. Then he recalled where he was and rose up on an elbow to face the stranger.

“Lieutenant Charlie Stuart, at your service.” His whisper held an edge of humor.

“What time is it?” Alex glanced at his wristwatch.

“’Tis just 2200 hours, Captain. I canna say much for your night life, sir.” His teeth flashed white in the darkness. “But I ken your meaning. I was able to hop a ride with a military train heading up to Auld Reekie tonight. The good lad here, Cadet Donovan, drove the twenty miles to fetch me and bring me back to the base.”

Alex grunted. So Stuart had arrived earlier than expected. He cast a glance beyond him at Donovan’s tall, thin silhouette. And it explained how he’d found his bunk.

The cadet shifted. “The colonel sent me to pick him up—”

“Keep it down over there!”

One of the instructors had awakened to grumble for silence. Alex started to rise. “Give me a few minutes, Lieutenant. I’ll meet you in the mess and we can talk there.”

“Aye, Captain.” Stuart sketched a comical salute from his crouched position and then rose to lead young Donovan from the tent.

Quickly and quietly, Alex exchanged his undershirt and donned his uniform, the nightmare still fresh in his mind. Each time he was visited by the dream, he tried to change the outcome, and each time he’d failed. Now as a civilian and with the lieutenant’s arrival, he was ready to begin his assignment. Yet if he would succeed—save his sister and all the innocent lives working at Moorside—he must rid himself of these ghosts.

Minutes later, his mind clear, Alex entered the mess and was relieved to see only Stuart inside. His MI5 liaison had also thoughtfully poured him a cup of coffee.

The lieutenant rose to his feet, tall and solidly built in his impeccable olive-green RAF uniform. In the lamplight of the dining hall, they assessed each other. He noted the lieutenant's wavy blond hair and dark-blue eyes and estimated the bonny prince's ruddy features to be close to his own age.

"As you were, Lieutenant." Alex moved to the table and took a seat while Stuart sat across from him. "Captain Weatherford said you have a codebook?"

Stuart nodded, the hint of a smile on his lips. "The years have passed, Captain Baird, but you're much the way I remember you."

Alex stared at him. "How do you know me, Lieutenant?"

"'Twas back in Reekie. You and my aulder brother Donald knew each other. Do you remember him from primary school?"

Alex tried to recall the years he and his family lived near the Princes Street station in Edinburgh. His maw had been alive for a part of that time, and he'd been just a wee lad. Still, the name Donald Stuart seemed familiar. He offered an apologetic shrug. "'Twas a long time ago."

"To be sure," Stuart said. "You and Donald were about six. I wasna more than a bairn myself, but I remember watching you lads from the window, playing football in the street."

The childhood memory suddenly returned, and Alex smiled. "Aye, a few of us joined several of the aulder lads from school, and on weekends we set up team fields along opposite sides of the road." He chuckled. "We'd dare one another to try for a goal and punt the ball across just as a carriage or a grocery cart passed by." He glanced at Stuart. "Where's Donald now?"

The lieutenant's features tensed. "My brother was killed two years ago aboard the HMS *Invincible*. The ship exploded and sank during the Battle of Jutland." He stared down at his coffee. "Only six men survived."

Alex bent over his own steaming cup. "I'm sorry."

Stuart raised his head, blue eyes somber. "Condolences to you as well, sir. I ken you lost a brother of your own last year." Bitterly, he added, "Seems we've all lost someone precious in this godforsaken war."

Alex nodded, then sought to change the subject. "How did you end up in MI5?"

"That took a bit of jam." Stuart drew a deep breath and leaned back in his seat. "I joined the Forty-third Squadron out of Stirling, and we

stationed at Avesnes-le-Comte in France. When I returned to London on furlough late last year, I ran into an auld pal who worked for the Admiralty. He knew of my language skills and recommended me to his chief while I was there.”

At Alex’s questioning look, he smiled. “Before the war, I built oil derricks for the Shell Company and worked throughout Europe and parts of Asia. New languages come easily to me.” He shrugged. “So I go wherever I’m sent.”

“And now they sent you here as my liaison.”

He nodded. “I’ll also be working as a flight instructor for these cadets.” He removed a small, soft-covered booklet from inside his tunic. “I’m certain you’ll recognize this, Captain.”

Alex took the codebook, quickly thumbing the pages. “A simple substitution cipher. Easy enough. We used the code during reconnaissance flights.” He glanced at Stuart. “How should I contact you here at East Fortune?”

“Use the telegraph office in Gretna. And unless you have information worth sending, you can update me every other day.” He paused. “Any questions, sir?”

“You ken anything more about this agent, Thomas Brown, or Rhymer? I wasna given much to go on.”

Stuart shook his head. “I’ve been told about as much as you, Captain. Scotland Yard is still interviewing suspects, and I was called in at the last minute to act as go-between with London.” He tilted his head. “Is your paperwork in order with Colonel Landon, sir?”

“Aye.” He slid the codebook inside his tunic. “So when can I leave?”

“Tonight, if you like.” Stuart reached for his coffee and grinned. “Tell me, Captain. How does it feel to be a civilian again?”



Maw, please! Tonight the cinema in Carlisle is showing *The Perils of Pauline*, starring the famous American actress Miss Pearl White! My friends from work got passes to go and the train leaves in an hour!"

Rose smiled from across the supper table as Hannah pleaded her case with her parents. She knew the girl badly wanted to go, for it was all the factory girls had talked about today during their breaks at work.

As for herself, she was relieved "Miss Lockhart" had managed to get through her first day of work as the new Women's Welfare shift supervisor. Rose's co-workers had seemed friendly enough, and most of her charges were respectful and helpful.

She was also grateful to be making a good wage, especially since Tilly's bank note was almost completely spent. By working twelve-hour days six days a week, as she had at Chilwell, she could hope to save quite a bit of money. And what she did receive would be her own from now on, not subject to her uncle's thievery.

Still, as she'd shrugged out of her jacket, she was glad for Sunday tomorrow. She definitely planned to sleep in!

"Miss Lockhart, please tell Maw that since I'm working at the factory, I'm auld enough to go to the cinema!"

Rose reeled in her thoughts and focused on Hannah across the table. Mrs. Baird sighed while Mr. Baird only shook his head. "Hannah, your parents love you and only want what is best for you."

"But I can *be trusted!*" Again she turned to her mother. "You dinna believe me, Maw?"

Another mother-daughter discussion ensued, and Rose flashed a quick smile at Mr. Baird, who winked at her.

She thought warmly about last night, settling into her new room with Winston. The Bairds had seen to her every comfort: pressed sheets and the Baird tartan coverlet turned back on the bed. A washstand at the ready with fresh lavender-scented water and even a small vase

filled with sprigs of the same fragrant flowers, placed beside the lamp on her nightstand.

Hannah's parents had sat with her in the parlor last evening after the Baird children went to bed, and they waited patiently for her to explain more about their daughter's breathless summary of "Miss Lockhart's life."

Rose was careful this time, making certain her explanations matched those she'd already told the girl, yet even now the memory of those lies made her squirm. These were good, honest people and she was still bemused over their wholehearted reception of her—Hannah and Mr. and Mrs. Baird, as well as their two young sons, Fergus and James, who sat to her left.

She cast the boys a sidelong glance and observed they were too busy feeding cooked peas to Winston to pay much attention to their older sister's dilemma. The terrier had growled and bared his teeth at them at first, just as he did with Hannah, but then soon took to the rambunctious boys, especially when he was sure of receiving food.

Rose nearly chuckled as she watched them glance at their mother and father, then grin conspiratorially before slipping another handful of peas under the table. Her aching heart throbbed anew with the pain of the past week. How she missed her own "Duggie" and Samuel!

Six-year-old James turned to her then, and she had to school her features when she noticed he'd lodged a pea into each nostril. Then he let out a burst of laughter, and the green round projectiles launched directly onto her plate.

"Good heavens!"

Hannah's bid for the cinema was forgotten as Mrs. Baird reached across the table to grab her youngest son's arm. "James Robert Baird! What are ye thinking to act like that at the table? Shall I tether ye to the post outside so ye can graze on weeds like a sheep?" Her stern expression suffused with color. "Ye'll apologize to Miss Lockhart right . . . this . . . minute."

James bent his reddish-blond head to Rose. "Sorry, Miss Lockhart."

Fergus gave a snicker, but Rose kept her eyes on James. "Before I accept your apology, you must promise me never to do it again."

"I promise, no more peas."

"All right then."

His mother gave her an appreciative glance before glaring at her other son. "That goes for ye as well, Fergus. Yer aulder and ken more than yer wee brother, and ye shouldna be encouraging him."

The boy dropped his head. "Aye, Maw." To Rose, he said, "I'm sorry, too."

Across the table, Hannah's cheeks flared. "Och, you . . . you silly bairns! You've ruined everything!" Tossing her napkin onto the table, she left her chair and stormed toward her room.

Mrs. Baird issued another sigh and, with a quick glance to her husband, excused herself to go in search of their daughter.

Mr. Baird glared at his two youngest offspring. "You two hooligans have hurt your sister's feelings. 'Tis time you cleared the table and rinsed the dishes to make up for it."

"Aye, Da" came their sullen replies as each stood and picked up the empty plates and cups and trudged with them into the kitchen. When they were out of earshot, Mr. Baird smiled at her. "Was your brother ever full of such mischief?"

Rose thought to tell him about one Christmas when she and the boys were home from school and she'd walked in on them having a rousing pillow fight, feathers flying everywhere, until Uncle had put a stop to their "uncouth behavior." But oh, how they'd laughed with each other!

Humor edged her lips, though she kept her mouth closed. She couldn't tell Mr. Baird the truth about her own brothers, and she had no idea what kind of boy Tilly's brother had been.

He must have sensed her reticence, as compassion replaced his humor. "I've been thoughtless, Miss Lockhart. He was a wee lad when he passed away, aye?"

"Yes." Rose hated lying. Yet she offered him another in order to set him at ease. "But even so, he loved to tease me. I think it must be built into boys."

Chuckling, he nodded. "I was the same as a lad. And as a parent, I've come to appreciate the love and patience of my own maw and da." He hesitated. "What do you remember most about yours, Miss Lockhart?"

What should she say? Already they knew she'd been fourteen when her parents died. And Tilly had never known her mother, nor had she really spoken of her father.

"My mum . . . she was a seamstress." She could tell him the truth at least about her own parents. "She had a lovely voice and always sang 'The Water Is Wide' while she worked on a piece of cloth. My dad was soft-spoken and loved telling me silly stories about our ancestors while he wove tartan cloth on a big loom." She held out her hands. "I remember his palms, always red and chafed from working so much with the wool." A sadness pierced her, recalling the memory, yet she

smiled at Mr. Baird. "They were good to me."

He had leaned back in his chair, his arms crossed as he listened, his expression kindly while he occasionally nodded his understanding. In him Rose saw her own dad, both men so completely different from her uncle. Sir Ridley Cutler was a man who demanded silence during evening meals when she and her brothers were at home, and whose wife cowered at the opposite end of the long formal dining table, too afraid to speak.

"Miss Lockhart?"

She glanced up to see that Mrs. Baird had returned to the dining room. "I've a favor to ask . . ." Her voice held uncertainty. "Hannah mentioned ye might be willing to take her into Carlisle tonight so she can see this film with her friends?"

Rose blinked. Was Hannah's mother willing to trust her with the welfare of her daughter? The family had only known her a day. "I . . . I do not know what to say."

Mrs. Baird reached for the back of her chair. "Och, I shouldna bother ye with this, lass. Ye must be weary after a full day's work. She can go another time."

"No!" Rose quickly stood. "I mean . . . I will accompany her to Carlisle, if you're certain you would wish me to."

"Of course." Mrs. Baird looked to her husband, who nodded. "After all, we trust ye with her welfare twelve hours each day at the factory. I wouldna request such a thing during the week, but tomorrow's Sunday and yer day off, so ye can have a nice sleep in and recover."

Rose's heart thrummed. The cinema! "How far is it to Carlisle?"

"Just ten miles by train, and the next one leaves in three-quarters of an hour." Mrs. Baird's amber eyes gleamed. "Bless ye, lass. 'Tis hard enough raising a daughter *without* a pack of wild laddies living in the same house."

At that moment, the loud *clank* of dishes sounded from the kitchen. Craning her head, Rose glimpsed James and Fergus standing at the sink, rinsing and stacking plates.

She turned to Mrs. Baird. "If you would like to tell Hannah, I will get ready."

Mrs. Baird smiled her relief. Rose hurried from the table toward her room, her excitement mounting as she remembered the last time she'd been to the cinema. It was her thirteenth birthday when Mum and Dad took her to see *David Copperfield* at the new Haymarket Theater in Edinburgh.

Ages ago now. And a year after that, her life had changed.

Uncle Ridley had decided films were in poor taste for his niece and any other proper woman, and she could still see her aunt's face, filled with such pathetic hope each time Rose begged for an outing.

Both then and now, she wondered how much of Aunt Delia's old life had been cut away and disposed of by Uncle Ridley. Delia had shrunk from the responsibility of her own sister's kin, leaving Rose and her brothers to fall prey to Uncle's strategy—shipped off to year-round boarding schools with only those precious Christmas visits giving them a chance to rekindle their affection for one another. And once, Rose had overheard the servants' whispers of how her aunt had become a shadow of herself after the asylum.

Entering her room, she was greeted by Winston's happy bark as he lay sprawled on her bed, his appetite sated with cooked peas. She breathed in the lovely scent of lavender and glanced toward her nightstand and the purple bouquet Mrs. Baird thoughtfully provided.

Moving to the closet, Rose also detected faint traces of leather, mustiness, and sweat. A man's room surely, evidenced by the blue-green tartan plaid on the bed and the wood-paneled walls. A brown cowskin bag full of golf clubs still sat propped against the wall, and a football rested on the floor beside the oak dresser.

Apparently, Mrs. Baird had decided to leave intact the remnants of her eldest son's presence. Perhaps having his things in here kept him alive for her during his long absences at war.

Their younger son, Ian Baird, had been dead a year now. Did any of his personal items remain to mark his memory . . . or had they been removed as being too painful to look upon?

Last night in the parlor, the couple made no mention of him, yet Rose had sensed a sadness beneath their kindness and warmth. How could she not when she herself understood loss only too well?

Removing the mauve jacket and skirt from the closet, she turned her mind back to the memory of her parents, having told Mr. Baird about them. Fragments she'd clung to, their lives never to be forgotten. While six years had lessened the pain, her sorrow would always remain.

She grabbed up her toiletries from the dresser and went before the washstand mirror to ready herself for the evening. Unpinning her hair to brush and re-braid, she caught the faint sound of a dish breaking in the kitchen and couldn't help smiling. Then recalling young James with his nose full of peas made her chuckle. A handful, indeed!

Mr. Baird had said it was to be expected of boys that age, and

reminded of the pillow fight long ago, Rose hoped Douglas and Samuel enjoyed a bit of mischievous fun at their school.

Her hand trembled with the brush. While she'd reasoned that her "death" would ensure their safety . . . were they safe? Her memorial was set for the day after tomorrow, so she didn't dare yet call the school to find out how they fared, as they were probably in Leicester.

Rose ached as she imagined her brothers alone and grieving within the somber halls of the estate. No one to comfort them, nothing like this bright, warm place filled with a loving family who had already made her feel welcome.

Next week, she must find a way to make contact with the school. Though even if they *were* safe as she prayed, until she could get them out of Britain, the boys remained under their uncle's influence.

She stared into the mirror as new anxiety filled her. Douglas, at nearly twelve, was already growing distant and aloof. Last Christmas, when Samuel tried to goad him into a playful wrestling match, he'd coolly refused. When she questioned him later, he informed her such behavior was undignified for a young gentleman.

What was happening to her Duggie? And how would young Samuel change?

Her chest tightened as she dropped the brush, her fingers working quickly to gather and repin her hair. "Work steady and save every penny," she told her reflection. "And God willing, before the first snow falls, you can all start a new life across the sea." She added, "For Tilly."

Once she'd dressed, Rose secured her hat and went to the parlor to join Hannah. The girl wore the same charcoal skirt and white blouse of yesterday, and across her slim shoulders a pretty blue-green plaid shawl light enough for a summer evening. A straw hat similar to her own perched at a jaunty angle against her loose hair.

"Och, such a pair of bonny lasses!" Mrs. Baird touched a hand to her lips as she came upon them. She removed several coins from her skirt pocket and handed the money to Rose. "For the train fare and cinema tickets. And a wee bit extra to buy yerselves tea and biscuits."

"Mrs. Baird, that is not necessary . . ."

"Her father and I insist." She laid a hand on Rose's arm. "Yer a good lass to chaperone our Hannah tonight, and we trust ye as we would an aulder daughter, if we'd had one."

Humbled by her testament of faith, Rose's eyes burned. "Thank you," she whispered.

Mrs. Baird patted her arm and turned to her daughter. "Consider this

an early birthday present, dear. And if ye mind yerself with Miss Lockhart this evening, we'll talk about more films in the future."

"I promise, Maw. Thank you!" Beaming, Hannah suddenly twirled in place, the hem of her charcoal skirt swirling. "Och, and Gladys and Colleen will be so surprised when I show up with Miss Lockhart!"

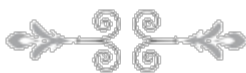
Gladys Dunham and Colleen Shire? Rose's buoyant mood sank. She doubted her arrival at the station with Hannah would be welcomed by the two factory girls whose mocking attitudes she'd already witnessed. And they hardly seemed suitable company for young Hannah.

At the girl's joy, however, Rose held her tongue. She'd ensure nothing went amiss tonight for her charges. "Miss Lockhart" was their supervisor, after all.

"You lassies had better not miss the train." Mr. Baird appeared from the kitchen and made to shoo them off with his cane. As Rose and her young charge headed toward the front door, Hannah was the first to rush outside. Rose followed, then turned to say a last good-bye and noted both parents' worried looks. "Is something wrong?"

"Och, no." Mrs. Baird wiped her eyes. "I meant what I said. We trust ye with our lass and wish ye both a lovely time." She glanced at her husband, who reached to put an arm around her shoulders. "'Tis just that we lost one of our bairns a year ago, and I . . . I tend to be a mother hen who canna stop clinging to her chicks."

Impulsively Rose returned to grasp both of Mrs. Baird's work-worn hands. "I promise to watch over Hannah and the other girls as if they were my own. Trust me, nothing will happen."



If only the earth would swallow her up and be done with her.

Gritting her teeth, Rose hardly knew which hurt more—the cramps in her stomach or the fact she'd been hoodwinked by two of the young women in her charge.

And the worst of it—she'd failed to keep her promise to the Bairds.

She sat hunched over in the lorry's open bed, her nausea increasing with each rocking motion of their bumpy ride back to Gretna. In the dark she could barely make out the weeping Hannah, seated beside her angry-faced father. Mr. Baird had been forced to hire his farming neighbor to drive him into Carlisle and liberate his daughter and her two friends from police custody. Gladys and Colleen sat on Hannah's

other side, their heads bent and silent.

Her stomach lurched as the lorry hit another divot in the road, and she pressed the handkerchief to her mouth before she abruptly turned to retch over the side.

Rose couldn't recall a time when she'd ever been so ill. At first, she feared she'd contracted the influenza circulating among some of the factory workers, but later when Mr. Baird arrived, she discovered the brazen pair with Hannah had slipped ipecac into her tea at the film's intermission.

If that wasn't awful enough, while she remained completely indisposed in the ladies' lounge, Gladys and Colleen swayed Hannah to join them in a public house a short walk from the cinema. *And* they bought her a drink! The policewoman on patrol discovered the underage girls and took all three to the Carlisle jail to be held, while the Bairds and Mrs. Nash at the factory were contacted.

Miserably, Rose eyed the pair beside Hannah, giving each girl as stern a look as she could muster. But it was already near midnight, and the sliver of moon made it doubtful they could see her anger.

Abruptly there was another lurch, and Rose thrust her head back over the edge. Oh, how she longed for her revenge . . . just as soon as she could stop feeling so sick!

The trip back to Gretna seemed to take forever, and she almost cried as the farmer's lorry pulled up next to the train station platform in town and the driver killed the engine.

She glimpsed Mrs. Nash standing next to the station office, awaiting their arrival. "Miss Lockhart, are you all right?"

Rose slumped against the edge of lorry's bed. "I'll . . . be fine . . . tomorrow," she choked out, her response muffled against the handkerchief.

Gladys and Colleen quietly climbed down from the back, and Mrs. Nash took them in hand. "You two will answer for this."

Even in the shadow of the station lamp, Mrs. Nash's hawkish face radiated anger.

"Miss Dunham, Miss Shire, I'm not letting you out of my sight. I will escort you back to your hostel and let Matron deal with you." With her back ramrod-straight, Mrs. Nash led the pair in the direction of Timber Town and the huts. Again the truck's engine roared to life, and the farmer drove the remaining half mile to the Bairds' cottage.

After thanking his neighbor, Mr. Baird hobbled on his cane toward the front door. Rose struggled to keep pace while his teary-eyed

daughter stormed ahead of them both.

Stumbling along beside him, Rose said, "Mr. Baird . . . so sorry to . . . let you down."

His sober face turned to her. "'Tis no fault on your part, Miss Lockhart." He reached to gently pat her on the shoulder. "You just concentrate on getting well."

She nodded into her handkerchief, grateful for his pardon, though she had yet to face Hannah's mother.

Arriving inside, they found Mrs. Baird in the parlor. She was clad in her nightclothes and holding her crying daughter. Her sad gaze sought out Rose. "Och, Miss Lockhart . . ."

Rose paused in front of her, intending to make her apologies. But a gentle nudge from Mr. Baird sent her off in the direction of her room. "Time enough to sort this tomorrow, lass. You go and get your rest."

Exhausted, her stomach roiling, Rose gladly obeyed. Once she'd reached her room, she peeled out of her clothes, dropping them where they lay before she pulled on her nightdress and collapsed onto the bed. Grabbing for the plaid coverlet, she wrapped herself in the soft wool, vaguely aware when Winston jumped up to lie down beside her. She cuddled him while her eyes drifted closed, and her last thought was gratitude—that God had given man Sundays off.

Because she had no intention of leaving her bed all day.



0130 HOURS

Alex bounced the beam of his flashlight from his watch to the curtained window of the cottage. He'd been surprised at Stuart's offer to drive him the two and a half hours into Gretna, but since his discharge papers were complete, he'd agreed.

He glanced back down the long drive toward the road where Stuart dropped him off. The man insisted he would stay at the Gretna Hotel before returning to the base in the morning.

Alex focused his light on the front porch and the top sill where Da always kept a key. His family would be asleep. The perfect time to steal inside.

Is that because you dinna want to wake them at this late hour . . . or because you can put off having to face them? He remembered the cadets in the mess hall at supper, surrounding him, hanging on his every word as if he were some legend and not an ordinary man.

If they could see you now, lad. He scowled and reached above the sill for the hidden key. Silently he unlocked and opened the door, then switched off the flashlight, grabbing up his valise. He'd slip into his room tonight and surprise them all at breakfast.

Moving stealthily through the house, he paused at Fergus and James's room, a set of bunk beds along the far wall. As his eyes adjusted to the shadows, he could make out their two small shapes beneath the blankets, snoring softly.

He turned toward the empty single bed along the opposite wall—Ian's bed—and a familiar ache seized him. Quickly, he moved down the hall, passing his sister's room and her steady breathing within. His pulse quickened as he imagined greeting them all in a few hours to announce he was home to stay after so many years of war. And he'd shoulder his burden each time he gazed into their faces.

With his parents' room at the other end of the cottage, he relaxed as he reached his own bedroom door. His exhaustion had returned, and it seemed impossible that seventy-two hours ago he'd been on a beach in Biarritz, France, a decorated RAF captain and flight commander.

Now he stood in his childhood home, a civilian ready to take on a saboteur who threatened to kill thousands. Without a doubt, the past several hours had changed his life.

Noiselessly he turned the knob, entering the room where he'd grown up during his boyhood years. As he softly closed the door behind him, he caught a faint whiff of lavender.

Maw must have dusted. Smiling, he crossed the floor toward the nightstand lamp when a low growl coming from the bed brought him up short. A dog?

Dropping his valise, he switched on his flashlight—and barely ducked in time to avoid the nine-iron flying toward his head.

"Get out, you thief!"

What the . . . ? He'd barely recovered his balance when the low growl turned into loud, excited barking.

"I said get out . . . or I'll scream!"

Reaching for the bedside lamp, Alex flipped it on and stared at the woman in white, kneeling on top of his blankets. She still held his golf club poised above her head.

"I dinna think screaming is necessary," he shouted, glaring at the white ball of fur on his bed. "Wheesht, you wee mutt, or you'll wake my whole family!"

"Hush, Winston!"

Keeping her grip on the club, she scooped up the dog and held it to her chest. The barking stopped, but the little white beastie bared its teeth at Alex.

He glowered at them both. "Who are you, and why are you here?"

"You must be Alex."

Despite her irascible tone, she blushed like a field of red poppies. She seemed to him to be vulnerable somehow, her angular face emphasizing the bruised half-moons beneath large blue eyes, while her long dark braid had unraveled, adding to her tousled appearance.

"Captain Alex Baird." He crossed his arms against his chest. "Now answer *my* question."

She tossed her head. "This happens to be *my* room now, and you are trespassing."

"That bed is mine, woman, and so is the club you tried to bash over

my head!”

Immediately she dropped the nine-iron onto the bed. Leaning back on her heels, she emitted a soft groan and grimaced as though in pain while she clutched the dog. “For your information, I am renting the room from your parents.” Chin raised, she reached to swipe away a drooping lock of hair from her eyes. “I would appreciate you leaving and closing the door behind you. I must . . . make myself presentable.”

That could take some time. Despite his annoyance, he held his tongue. Instead he asked, “Why would you be renting my room—?”

“Alex?”

His maw had opened the door. “Son!” she cried, flying at him in her night-robe while tears streamed down her cheeks. His chest tightened as he enfolded her in his arms, his earlier fears melting. It had been too long since he’d been home.

She finally pulled back to look at him as if she might find something wrong. “We didna get word ye were coming. Why would ye not tell us?”

“A last-minute decision.” He smiled gently. “I’d planned to steal in quietly and surprise you in the morning.” He glanced at the woman on the bed. “It looks as if I’m the one who got the surprise.”

“Och, where are my manners? Ye’ve not met our new boarder, Miss Lockhart. She works at the factory with yer sister.” She glanced toward the bedraggled woman on the bed. “This is my son, Alex. He is a captain in the RAF and has been fighting in France.” She turned to him, pride in her voice. “And now he’s home!”

Alex forced a smile for his maw. So this crazed woman . . . Miss Lockhart . . . had been telling the truth, after all. Why did his parents need a boarder?

He started to ask Maw before she nudged him toward the door.

“Come, lad, let’s leave poor Miss Lockhart to get her rest. We can talk in the morning. Meanwhile, ye’ll be comfortable enough sleeping in with Fergus and James.”

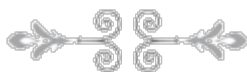
Back in the hall, she led him to his brothers’ room. “The bed’s all made so ye can slip inside and get some sleep,” she whispered and reached for his hand. “Tis so braw having ye home, Alex.”

He swallowed past the knot in his throat and gently squeezed her fingers. “I’m glad to be here, Maw.” *In more ways than one.* “Now, I’ll be fine. You go back to bed.”

Her soft chuckle reached his ears. “I canna think how I’ll ever manage to sleep.”

“Well, you can try anyway.” He leaned and touched his lips to her warm cheek, then waited until she’d gone. Standing at the door to his brothers’ room, he stared into the shadows at Ian’s empty bed. Then he stowed his valise on the coverlet and made his way back to the parlor. Grabbing the quilt from his da’s chair, he stretched out on the couch.

There were some things he still wasna ready to face.



“Poke him and see if he’s awake.”

“No, ye do it. If he’s not awake, he might get mad.”

“Fraidy-cat. I dare ye.”

“Yer a fraidy-cat, Fergus.”

Awakened by the childish whispering above him, Alex pretended to sleep as he lay a moment under the blanket, holding back a smile. Suddenly with a loud roar, he threw off the quilt and vaulted from the couch, grabbing up both brothers in their nightclothes. “Who dares to awaken the great lion in his den at this early hour?”

Squealing their laughter, they clung to him as he swung them around in a circle and then plopped with them down onto the cushions, one lad on either side.

Fergus looked up at him, dark eyes shining. “We heard Maw tell Da ye were here, Alex. When did ye get home?”

He pulled them into a huddle and spoke in a low voice, “I stole into the house during the night, silent as the ghost that hovers over Blood Pond on Mr. Greene’s farm.” He leaned back against the couch and grinned at them. “And you both slept like wee bairns the whole time.” He turned to James, then Fergus. “Have you lads been minding yourselves?”

“Aye!” they said in unison, and James wedged a small hand behind Alex’s back before reaching to hug him tightly at the waist. “How long will ye stay this time, Alex?”

What should he say? Gazing down at the tousled reddish-blond head of his youngest brother, he reached to brush back a few tendrils. “How long would you like me to stay?”

“Forever!” cried Fergus, and James tightened his hold.

Alex’s chest constricted as he slung an arm around Fergus, drawing him close. “Forever’s a long time, lads,” he said. “But I can stay a lot longer than I did the last time. How would that be?”

Fergus nodded, his eyes bright. "Are ye still flying planes?"

"Aye, and one day I'll take you both up in the air to soar the skies."

James looked up. "But . . . we willna die, will we, Alex?"

Alex smiled at his brother, his throat as tight as his chest. "No, laddie, we'll go up after the war." He changed the subject. "When did you two get so braw, anyway? I swear you've both grown since I saw you last."

Fergus nodded. "Maw says if we want to be tall as ye, we must eat our greens."

"Maw's right, and you should listen to her."

"Except when we're feeding the dog," James confessed. "Winston likes our peas at supper."

Alex's humor faded, recalling the noisy ball of fur baring its teeth at him last night. "You shouldna be feeding that animal from the table—"

"Hannah, I'll hear no more excuses! You showed poor judgment last night, and your maw and I have decided your punishment."

The sound of his da's angry voice from the kitchen made Alex pause. Fergus looked at him. "I think Da's mad at Hannah. Did she do something bad?"

"You lads never mind. Go and get dressed. Maw will be cooking us a fine breakfast soon. Quick with you now, go!" Both boys bounced off the couch and raced toward their room.

"B-but, Da, my friends, they swore they were taking me to meet Miss Lockhart! I didna ken it was a trick until I was inside the public house and they gave me a drink!"

His sister . . . drinking in a pub? Alex leaned forward, straining to listen.

"Did Miss Lockhart tell you to meet her there?"

"N-no . . ."

"And once you realized it was a trick, you didna leave as you should?"

"I did try, I swear it! And when I was about to give the drink back, the policewoman . . . she came up to me and demanded to know my age. I couldna lie to her!"

Alex heard Da's heavy sigh as he continued.

"Surely you ken our circumstances, lass. I had to pay for the petrol in Mr. Greene's truck to come and get you in Carlisle. And Miss Lockhart. Och, the shame of it!"

A long pause ensued before his da passed sentence.

"Your maw and I willna trust you again anytime soon. You must stay

here in town so we can keep an eye on you.”

There was a loud scrape of a chair, followed by his sister’s teary voice.

“It wasna my fault! And I have an important job at the factory now and I earn a good wage, so how can you still treat me like a bairn? ’Tis so unfair!”

Hannah burst from the kitchen, eyes red from crying. Rushing through the parlor, she stormed toward the entryway, oblivious to Alex as she slammed the front door in her wake.

He stared after her. What the deuce was going on?

As he turned back toward the kitchen, he saw Da standing in the doorway. Tension and weariness were etched in his face before he saw Alex and smiled warmly. “Good morning, son. Maw said you’d arrived in the wee hours. I’m happy to see you home.”

As he ambled toward the couch with the help of a cane, Alex fought to mask his shock. His da looked years aulder and so frail. Quickly he stood and closed the distance between them, gentle with his embrace. “Da? What’s happened to you?”

“Let’s sit, Alex.” Da hobbled over to his favorite chair while Alex sat on the couch.

“’Twas a clumsy accident. I was at the rail yard to oversee the off-loading of a new shipment of ties for the track. Someone called to me, and I shouldna have turned at that moment, because the stack shifted and a tie came loose. Knocked me right to the ground.” He shook his head. “I injured my back and I’ve been laid up since winter.”

Winter? Why wasna he told? “Maw wrote to me, but she never said —”

“Because I asked her not to tell you.” Once more Da’s tone held a steel edge, but then his expression eased. “You had enough on your mind in France just staying alive. I didna want you to fash about us. We’ve done well enough. These days I help Fergus and James with their schooling, and your maw takes in mending from the factory workers. Hannah’s job earns a fair wage, and up until now anyway ’tis helped.”

Alex gazed at the man who had raised him by himself for a time after Alex’s real maw died. An experienced yardman for the Caledonian Railway, Da had worked for the railroad from the time Alex wore nappies. But now . . .

He was a shadow of his former self. “What about work? Can you go back?”

Da bent his head, revealing a thinning shock of silver that hadna been there the last time Alex was home. "My job at the railroad . . . I canna sit or stand for very long, so I had to give it up." He lifted his gaze. "I do receive a small pension."

But not nearly enough. Alex worked to smother his ire. How could his parents keep from him the fact they were struggling? He'd been sending home a portion of his pay over the years, but had he kenned the situation he would have done more. "That's why you took in a boarder."

"Aye." Da straightened. "And now with your sister's trouble, 'tis a blessing Miss Lockhart is here."

"I heard you and Hannah in the kitchen." He leaned to rest his hands on his knees. "What was Miss Lockhart doing in Carlisle with Hannah and her friends?"

"We asked her to chaperone your sister to the cinema." Da reached up and tunneled his fingers through the sparse thatch of hair.

"Hannah's been restless since last year, and especially now that she's auld enough to work inside the factory instead of cleaning huts. It was a big step up for her and with a better job and better pay . . . well, you heard her. She thinks it makes her all grown up now."

"How is Miss Lockhart qualified to act as a chaperone?" Again he envisioned the wild woman who nearly thrashed him with his golf club last night—and her noisy cur. "She obviously failed in her duty, and now the consequences will affect you all."

"I did not shirk my responsibilities, Captain Baird."

Alex turned to find Miss Lockhart standing at the arch between the hall and parlor. Instead of her nightclothes, she now wore a wrinkled pink jacket and skirt, but the pale features and dark bruises beneath her eyes remained.

"There were . . . circumstances beyond my control," she said primly. "The two young women your sister calls friends tainted my tea with a compound, which left me . . . indisposed." Again she thrust her chin at him. "I was unable to return to my seat in the theater, otherwise I would have discovered Hannah's absence."

Her prickly nature irritated him further. "Maybe you're a naïve young woman yourself, Miss Lockhart. You let three young lassies get the best of you. Not what I'd call a good candidate for a chaperone—"

"Alex." Da cautioned him with a look. "You dinna ken the circumstances last night. Miss Lockhart was quite ill."

"Your father is right."

She started to approach them, and Alex noted her measured steps were a bit unsteady. "What was this compound in your tea?"

She paused beside the couch, then moved toward the padded chair next to his da. Once seated, she raised her bruised eyes to him. "If you must know, it was ipecac."

He coughed to cover his amusement. A few months ago, some of the lads in his squadron pulled the same trick on a fellow pilot about to go on furlough for the weekend.

"And contrary to what you may think, I am not naïve." She tipped her head back, trying to look down at him. "In fact, I was recently hired as a Women's Welfare shift supervisor at HM Factory Gretna, and I believe I am doing a good job."

He smiled his sarcasm. "Actions speak louder than words, Miss Lockhart."

"Indeed, Captain Baird." Her color rose. "But words are powerful too, and yours seem to indicate a man who enjoys finding fault in others *and* you judge based on your own assumptions. Neither trait being a reflection on your wonderful parents, of course."

She smiled toward his da, and Alex stiffened. He opened his mouth to deliver his next salvo, when Da's glance pierced him.

Alex kenned the look and leaned back against the couch. Perhaps he was being unfair in his conclusion without getting all the facts. And the effects of ipecac had likely made her retch for hours.

He let out a sigh. In truth, he was more angered at coming home to find his family in such dire circumstances that they had found it necessary to take in a perfect stranger to live *in his room* and act as his sister's chaperone—with disastrous results.

And it didna change the fact Miss Lockhart *was* naïve. He kept that thought to himself, however. "You said you recently hired on at HM Factory Gretna?"

"That is correct."

"And how many workers do you supervise?"

"I have quite a few young women in my care, including your sister."

"And her two friends . . . ?"

She looked away. "Yes."

"Well, as a flight commander for two years, I can speak from experience. You're in for some troubles ahead, make no mistake."

9



The arrogant man! Rose started to frown in displeasure, then closed her eyes at the incessant pounding in her head. Why had she decided to leave her bed this morning? Surely not to subject herself to Captain Baird's inquisition and assumptions!

Her stomach gurgled and she pressed a hand to her middle, longing to retreat to her room. *His* room, she qualified, gritting her teeth. This morning she'd crept out in the small hours to find him fast asleep on the couch. Her guilt at taking his room would have prevailed if not for her pride now, and she determined to show him she would not crawl away like some chastened schoolgirl.

He had some nerve telling her she was doomed to failure, though his words made her pulse jump. She simply could not fail. The stakes were too high.

"Och, 'tis good to see yer all up and about."

Mrs. Baird appeared from the hall clad in her white apron. "And Alex, ye've had a chance to visit with Da and to better acquaint yerself with our Miss Lockhart." She beamed, oblivious to the silent hostility. "I'll have breakfast out in a few minutes. Has anyone seen Hannah?"

"I'll help you, Mrs. Baird." Eager to escape her tormentor, Rose stood and then grabbed for the arm of the chair as another wave of the lingering nausea passed.

"Lass?" Mr. Baird eyed her with concern.

"I'm all right." She gave him another smile, then darted a backward glance at his son as she headed toward the kitchen.

Mrs. Baird put her in charge of making porridge, a task she'd not performed since she was a girl living at home with her parents.

"How are ye feeling this morning, Miss Lockhart?"

Rose paused in stirring the oat mixture. "Better, thank you. I would appreciate an aspirin if you have one to spare."

"Of course!" Mrs. Baird reached into a cupboard and retrieved a

bottle of white pills. She handed them to Rose, who thanked her and took a tablet with a glass of water.

"Mrs. Baird, I'm . . . very sorry about last night." She held out the aspirin bottle. "I broke my promise to you." She looked down, averting her gaze. Captain Baird had been right about her gullibility, especially with Gladys and Colleen. She'd known before leaving the house last night those two might be trouble, but still thought she could manage them. Tilly certainly would have kept them in hand.

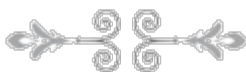
"'Tis not yer fault, lass." Mrs. Baird clasped her hand along with the bottle. "I'm just grateful that ye both are home safely." She returned the aspirin to the cupboard. "Mr. Baird tells me Mrs. Nash from the factory was waiting at the station when ye returned?"

"Yes." Rose had the vague memory of her employer's presence last night.

"Aye, well, I suppose she wasna happy with any of them." Mrs. Baird turned to her, worry in her eyes. "It might even cost Hannah her job."

Remorse intensified Rose's headache. Already the Bairds had financial difficulties, and because she'd allowed herself to be duped by two teens, their daughter could get the sack and lose much-needed income for the family. "I cannot make any promises, Mrs. Baird. But I *shall* speak with Mrs. Nash tomorrow."

A relieved smile lit her face. "Bless you."



Because it was Sunday, the Baird family readied for church after breakfast. Since the food appeased Rose's head, and Mrs. Baird's mint tea soothed her stomach, she accepted their invitation to join them.

The family arrived at the church a few minutes early. "We usually stop at the headstone and say a prayer for Ian before we go inside." Mrs. Baird gazed at her eldest son.

Rose caught the faint color in his rugged face. "You go ahead, Maw. 'Tis getting close to time, and I want to save our seats."

He strode off into the church while Mrs. Baird looked after him, fresh grief in her eyes.

"I'll come with you and the family, Mrs. Baird, if that would be all right?"

She smiled. "Of course, lamb. 'Tis this way." They went into the churchyard and stood before the stone slab erected in Ian Baird's

memory. While all heads bowed as Mr. Baird said a few words, Rose couldn't help but wonder why the captain had refused to join his family.

Once they went inside, she found herself squeezed into a front pew between Hannah and her older brother. Rose glanced at the spacious surroundings and recognized a few faces from the factory. The congregation consisted of mostly women and children, as the men were likely still in the war or dead.

She tried to relax in the seat despite her nearness to Captain Baird. Since feeling more like herself, she'd taken the time to notice his physique. He was quite tall and lean, and his muscled arms and broad shoulders suggested years of hard work. He smelled faintly of the leather she recognized from his room, along with a spicy scent; and with him seated so close, his body radiated heat like a furnace.

How long did he plan to be in Gretna? And would he continue to hold a grudge against her for Hannah's mishap? She should probably apologize, yet his accusations still stung.

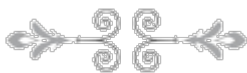
As the preacher climbed toward the pulpit to speak, Rose recalled her boarding school days, when Sunday service was a requirement of all the girls. Many times, however, she'd visited the chapel on her own with only God to dry her tears and listen to her misery at being alone in a new and uninviting place. She'd missed those comforting hours. For unlike her parents, bless them, who had nurtured her spiritual upbringing, once she and her brothers became wards of her aunt and uncle, there was no more talk of church or of God, just the rules Uncle Ridley set down for their behavior.

Leaning forward, she anticipated the preacher's sermon. Would he speak about forgiveness? If so, then she would make the effort to amend her attitude toward Captain Baird, if not for herself, then at least for the sake of keeping harmony within his family.

"Nothing remains hidden from God's all-seeing eye!"

Rose shot up straight in her seat at the preacher's words. When he continued to expound on the perils of lying, he seemed to look right at her. She plucked at the tips of her gloves and darted a quick glance at Captain Baird, who appeared unfazed by the admonitions. Her gaze then swept across the entire congregation, and she noticed they remained rapt and motionless.

Was the preacher directing the message at her? Oh, Lord, what are you trying to tell me?



Later at the house, Rose continued to flog herself with the preacher's words as she sat with the Baird family out on the back porch. *She* knew that *God* knew what she'd done nearly a week ago, but she didn't believe He blamed her for her actions. In fact, it seemed preordained that she be given this second chance at life, even though at a terrible cost to her dearest friend.

She leaned back against the wicker seat. Tilly was gone now, and Rose could not bring her back. She must live out her friend's dream, and at the same time save her brothers from Uncle Ridley's unscrupulous influence.

"Looks like the lads are getting as much exercise as your dog, Miss Lockhart."

Mr. Baird had made the remark, and she turned to find him smiling as he indicated with his pipe the scene playing out in the grassy yard.

The July day was sunny yet cool, and Fergus and James were chasing after Winston, who was much faster than both boys and possessed in his mouth the ball Mrs. Baird fashioned from tying two ends of a wool-stuffed stocking together. "Winston seems to be enjoying himself. I imagine all three will be exhausted by tonight."

"Aye. The lads willna have the energy to chatter away at nonsense until the wee hours." Mr. Baird glanced at his oldest son. "You'll get a peaceful night's rest, Alex, if that's the case."

Rose swiveled her attention to Captain Baird, who stretched out lazily in the wicker chair beside his father. His chestnut hair, cut short in military fashion, shone coppery in the sun.

He swung around toward his father, the green eyes pausing on her. "'Tis my hope too, Da. Those two are like magpies at dawn."

Rose thought the comment odd, as she'd seen him asleep on the couch last night. Mr. Baird smiled, however, and taking a puff on his pipe he turned his attention to his daughter.

Hannah sat off by herself on an old stump, watching her brothers at play. Alex angled his head in that direction. "My sister's still not talking?"

"I think she's waiting to know her fate tomorrow."

As if on cue, both men turned to Rose. Mr. Baird's face was creased in concern while his son's stretched taut with distrust. She in turn averted her eyes to the young girl on the stump and silently renewed

her vow to speak with Mrs. Nash about Hannah first thing in the morning.

“Refreshments when yer ready. Our Sunday treat.” Mrs. Baird appeared at the back door bearing a tray of jam biscuits and lemonade. Setting the fare on the wooden table, she resumed her seat on the other side of her husband and picked up the pair of men’s trousers she’d been mending.

The couple smiled as they looked on at their youngest sons. Fergus had finally managed to get close enough to grab for the stocking in Winston’s mouth, but the little dog dodged him at the last moment and the boy landed empty-handed in the grass.

His parents chuckled, and even Captain Baird smiled at their antics. Meanwhile, her little dog gripped the stocking ball in his teeth and wagged his stubby tail while watching James tackle his felled brother. The two boys giggled as they tussled on the ground.

Once again their laughter made her yearn for her own little family, and the merry sounds triggered in Rose another fond memory—Douglas and Samuel carousing in the snow one Christmas Eve in Leicester. She’d watched them play leapfrog with each other until both fell together into a laughing heap, much like these boys now. Such precious memories . . .

“Where are you from, Miss Lockhart? You sound English.”

She turned to the captain and found him staring at her. “I . . . actually, I was born and raised in Glasgow—”

“Miss Lockhart’s an orphan.” From her place on the stump, Hannah turned to join in their conversation. “Her parents died in a bus accident when she was just fourteen.”

“Aye, poor lamb.” Mrs. Baird paused in her sewing to glance at her eldest son. “And she lost a brother as well.”

“He was a lad and died before her parents did.” Hannah left the stump to approach and take a chair. “How did he die, Miss Lockhart?”

“Hannah, dear! Mind yer manners.” Mrs. Baird’s tone held mild censure. “If Miss Lockhart wishes to share her personal life with us, let it be by her choice.” She turned to Rose and smiled. “Only if ye’d like to, dear.”

With all eyes upon her, Rose moistened her lips. “He . . . it was unexpected.” She frowned, her mind racing to keep her stories straight. What a mess of things she’d made!

Her gaze darted back to Captain Baird, his attention still fixed on her. She couldn’t afford any more mistakes. One misstep would send

her packing, and it could mean going back to Leicester.

She shuddered to think of what Julien might have in store for her punishment. "I . . . I apologize." Pulling her attention from the piercing green eyes, she turned to Mrs. Baird. "I realize it was a long time ago, but my brother . . . I still find it painful . . ."

"Of course ye do, and we'll speak no more about it." Mrs. Baird left her chair and came to give Rose's shoulders an affectionate squeeze. Then she set to work passing out the refreshments, and Rose gratefully accepted the glass of lemonade and a biscuit.

"I imagine you'll remain here in Gretna for some time, Miss Lockhart?"

Rose had started to take a sip of her drink when she paused at the captain's question. "I plan on it, yes. And you?"

Instead of the cynical retort she'd expected, he looked at his parents and his sister. "I'll be staying as well."

"What!" Mrs. Baird nearly dropped the refreshment tray before setting it down.

Mr. Baird held his pipe to his chest, staring at his son in bemused delight. "You ken that I'm happy beyond words, lad. But . . . is the war over?"

"For me, aye." He hesitated. "The RAF gave me a medical discharge."

"You're unwell?" Mr. Baird scrutinized him.

"'Tis all right, Da. Just battle fatigue. Nothing that a good long rest willna cure."

"But how do you feel, son?" Mrs. Baird searched his face with a worried look.

"I'm fine, Maw, a few headaches now and then." He smiled at her. "And since I'll be home for some time, I thought I'd see about getting work at the munitions factory. I served as an airplane mechanic during the first year of the war, so maybe they can use someone to keep the machinery running smoothly."

"God be praised, Alex, 'tis the best news I've had in a long time!" Mrs. Baird rushed to her son and hugged him while Hannah shrieked her joy and vaulted from her seat to join them.

"Miss Lockhart, did you hear? My brother will be working with us at the factory. Is that not grand?"

Rose managed a smile. "Yes, grand indeed." Then she saw Mr. Baird's eyes glisten as he watched his family embrace, and she chided her lack of enthusiasm. Captain Baird could be irritating, but with the

grief his family had already suffered in losing one son to the war, this was the best news for them all.

Love flowed between them like water—mother and son, then daughter and father, and soon Fergus and James, who had sensed good news and came rushing up from the lawn to clasp their small hands around the waists of their sister and mother.

So much affection. Rose averted her hungry gaze, the ache in her heart palpable. In six years' time, she'd shared only a handful of hugs and kisses during the holidays with her younger brothers. And poor Aunt Delia, too afraid of her husband to show more than an occasional brush of her hand.

It hadn't been nearly enough. And now *she* had become the intruder here, and with their son home, he would certainly wish to have his old room back. That meant searching out a new living arrangement.

Rose stared out at the yard. Winston stood poised, observing the activity on the porch. His tail wagged uncertainly while his mouth still held the stocking.

The pain in her chest rose to her throat. She must surrender the dog if she was to find quarters with another supervisor or stay temporarily in the hostels.

"Miss Lockhart, would ye like another?"

Rose snapped her head around. Mrs. Baird now stood beside her, holding the plate of jam biscuits. Hannah had retaken her seat on the porch while the two small boys stood beside the table, gulping down glasses of the lemonade. "Yes, thank you."

Taking a biscuit from the tray, she looked up at the kind woman. "I wonder if you and Mr. Baird would consider taking over Winston's care when I leave?"

"What are ye speaking of, lass?"

"Since Captain Baird . . . your son, will remain in Gretna, he'll want his bedroom. I shall find another place to rent."

"Nonsense! We're glad to have ye with us, lass. Besides that, we promised a full month's room and board, and so ye shall have it. Alex, yer happy to sleep in with the lads for now, aye?"

"Aye, Maw."

He seemed hardly keen on the idea, and her memory flew back to his slumbering on the couch. She said nothing, however. Better to make peace with him, especially if they were to be in the same company for the next month. "Thank you, Captain."

Mrs. Baird leaned in and added in a low voice, "And we appreciate

ye speaking on Hannah's behalf tomorrow."

The girl must have heard her mother; Hannah's glowing face dulled as she rose quietly from her chair and took up her earlier perch on the stump. Rose sympathized with her, and with the family. She *would* get on her knees and beg Mrs. Nash if that was what it took to save the girl's job.

Turning back to those on the porch, her gaze collided with the captain's look of condemnation, and guilt warred with her dislike of him.

Of course he still blamed her. In his mind, *she* was responsible for letting herself be drugged by those brash girls and left to suffer in the cinema's lounge. But his sister still had much to learn about being accountable for her actions, including her choice of friends.

She arched her back, giving him equal censure. Was a truce between them even possible?

He barely nodded, as though taking up the challenge, while a smirk played along his lips.

Rose fought against her anger, an emotion she'd learned to control over the past six years. Truce or not, for the next month she *must* persevere despite his prejudice, and if he got a job at the factory tomorrow, it would mean suffering each other's company day and night.

10



His hunt for Rhymer had begun.

Alex stood with clipboard in hand the following day, observing two forklift operators carefully maneuver the five-hundred-pound bales of cotton inside the factory stores.

He'd accompanied his sister and Miss Lockhart into Moorside that morning, having no idea that when he applied for the job as a machinist mechanic, he'd instead receive a position allowing him full access to the site and the means to search for Kahverengi's agent.

It was Weatherford's doing, of course; especially when the interviewer introduced himself as Mr. Arthur Timbrell, site superintendent and Alex's contact at the factory.

Timbrell barely glanced at his application before assigning him the job of inspector for Site Three, where highly explosive nitroglycerine and nitrocotton were produced to make cordite. It made sense that Rhymer would choose this area to create his destruction. Alex was pleased that his new post gave him the flexibility to find his quarry, *and* that his sister worked in the same complex so he could do all in his power to keep her safe.

That is, if Hannah still had a job.

The lunch whistle blew, and Alex signaled a halt to the forklift drivers. "Fine job," he called to them once they'd killed their engines. "Have your dinner and we'll finish up when you return."

Two young lassies dismounted, each touching the brim of her bonnet to him before walking toward the ladies' canteen.

He should probably do the same. Workers gathered at lunchtime would be his best opportunity to scan faces for possible saboteurs without arousing suspicion. His stomach rumbled loudly then, and determined, he started off in the opposite direction toward the men's canteen.

"Alex!"

Pausing, Alex turned as his sister waved to him.

“You’ll never guess!” she said, rushing forward, her eyes shining. “Miss Lockhart spoke to Mrs. Nash early this morning, and we all get to keep our jobs!”

“That’s good to hear, lass.” Admittedly, he was surprised—and pleased—with Miss Lockhart’s sense of justice.

“And now you are working in the same building with us, aye?”

“I’m one of the inspectors for this site.”

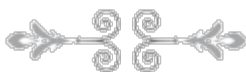
“Well, that means I’ll get to spend time with you here as well as at home!”

He grinned. “So you willna tire of seeing this auld face every day?”

“Never.” Her young features sobered. “You’ve been away far too long for that to happen, dear brother.” She glanced behind her. “I’ve just an hour, and Maw said if everything got sorted, I could stay and eat dinner with the other girls today.” She leaned up to give him a peck on the cheek. “I’ll see you after.”

Just like a butterfly. Alex smiled as she flew off to join her friends. No doubt Miss Lockhart was already in the canteen, being much celebrated by her workers for saving their jobs.

He shook his head and continued on toward the men’s canteen. In his view, she was still somewhat gullible, but she’d made his sister very happy.



Sand . . .

Rose sat in the ladies’ canteen with a mouthful of gritty sandwich. Looking wildly about for a place to get rid of the food, she glanced down the long table toward Mrs. Nash, speaking with another of the Welfare supervisors, and seeing they were engaged in conversation, she pressed her napkin to her lips and pretended to cough, spitting out the fouled morsel.

She grabbed up her glass of water, taking several gulps, but the granules still crunched between her teeth. A soft moan escaped her as she peered into her lunch bucket. The rest of her food—the fresh raspberries and wedge of Dunlap cheese Mrs. Baird had packed for her—was coated in sand as well.

Heat flooded her face as she glared toward the next table, where Hannah and most of her co-workers sat eating and chattering. It made

sense now why Gladys and Colleen stole glances her way, and every so often leaned in to whisper to one another, then laugh behind their hands.

Gripping the glass of water, she took another cleansing drink. Not only was their prank completely inappropriate but it also ended with a shameful waste of food. She hadn't yet received her wages and relied completely on the struggling Baird family to provide all her meals.

Did the two girls have no shame?

Rose began to regret having asked for their pardon. This morning, she'd begged Mrs. Nash to let all three girls keep their jobs. Her supervisor had agreed but insisted each pay a hefty fine for the ill-treatment Miss Lockhart received in Carlisle.

Only young Hannah had shown remorse for Saturday night, and she'd been grateful to Rose for saving her position. The other two, still laughing together over this latest insult, seemed to think it was a game of revenge.

The plea for their mercy had stemmed from her desire to protect Hannah from appearing favored, as Miss Lockhart was living in the Baird home. Her own years at boarding school as Sir Cutler's "poor Scots relation" taught her the painful lesson of being an outcast among her peers.

She'd also hoped that by giving the girls a second chance, they might change their ways.

Still crunching the grit between her teeth, she replaced the lid on her lunch bucket. Gladys and Colleen had obviously mistaken her kindness for weakness.

She closed her eyes. If Tilly were here, she'd likely exact her revenge on the two troublemakers to ensure they behaved themselves. But Rose knew her own leadership skills were sorely lacking. Unlike her dear departed friend, she was several years younger and not nearly as hardened by life.

Her stomach growled then, and she set the offensive lunch bucket on the floor beside her. She might not be twenty-six years old or have Tilly's background, but she could learn to be tough, couldn't she? And now that Gladys and Colleen had taken their petty revenge for the fines, hopefully life at the factory would resettle and the girls return their focus to working instead of causing trouble.



So much for wishful thinking.

Rose sat at supper with the Bairds the following evening, pushing her food around her plate with her fork. Not only was she weary after the long twelve-hour day, but she also felt frustrated at once again being the target for revenge.

You are so naïve, Rose. She stabbed at the piece of cooked turnip. Hadn't Captain Baird warned her she would have more trouble? No doubt the man would crow if he knew the truth.

Beneath the table she wriggled her toes inside her greasy stockings—a hurtful reminder of the machine oil *someone* had poured into her rubber work boots that morning before she'd arrived at work.

“So how do ye fancy yer new job as site inspector, son?” Mr. Baird had asked the question, his dark eyes shining as he gazed at the captain. “Quite a bit more responsibility than what you'd imagined when you hired on yesterday?”

Rose half listened while the captain explained to his parents his work duties at the factory. She'd noticed that since his return, no one had broached the subject of the war in France or his experiences there, likely to avoid resurrecting any painful memories, especially about the son they had lost.

She was still curious about Sunday and the captain's reluctance to visit his brother's gravestone at the church. And the fact he continued to sleep on the couch at night instead of the bed in Fergus and James's room. Obviously, he too had been greatly affected by his brother's death.

And what of your own brothers? Rose stared blindly at the food on her plate. According to her obituary last week, the quiet memorial service was held yesterday in Leicester. How were Douglas and Samuel coping with her death? Were they still at the estate or back at school? Or worse—had her uncle made plans to send them off to some orphanage

overseas?

A knot settled in her chest. Just a few more days, once it was safe to call, and she'd find a way to contact the school.

"What is your opinion of the scheme, Miss Lockhart?"

Wrenched from her silent misery, she turned to the captain, blinking. Scheme . . . had the topic of conversation shifted? "Pardon?"

"The official Rationing Order to be signed this month."

"Oh . . . yes, that." According to the newspaper, ration cards were soon to be issued to each household in Britain. "Well, we have already been rationing unofficially for some time, so I believe the new law will ensure fairness. Everyone should receive the same quantities of food at the same cost, rather than this food profiteering only the wealthy can afford."

"Aye, well said, Miss Lockhart." He tipped his head to her, his green eyes warm.

Inexplicably pleased by his approval, she added, "Since I am renting from your parents, I plan to apply for my own rations card and contribute to the family while I am here."

"How kind of you, lass." Mr. Baird beamed. "We can always use extra food with these growing lads."

"Most generous, Miss Lockhart." Once more the captain nodded his approval before his gaze narrowed. "You seem a bit preoccupied tonight. Anything happen at work?"

Rose shook her head, offering a weak smile as her toes again squirmed inside the greasy stockings. "Just tired after a long day." A half-truth was better than a lie, wasn't it? And he could hardly prove her wrong since she'd refused to give satisfaction to the alleged troublemakers at work by making an issue of it. Instead, she'd pretended all was well today while she walked around in the squishy boots.

Her feet were wrinkled as prunes.

"I wondered why ye only picked at yer food." Mrs. Baird's eyes held concern. "A good night's rest will make ye fit and ready to face another day."

"I am certain you are right." Rose prayed more than believed that tomorrow would dawn without some new prank waiting for her. "Thank you for supper, Mrs. Baird. Even with rationing, you make such wonderful meals, and I am only sorry to be more tired than hungry tonight."

She rose then, ignoring the captain's steady gaze. "If you will excuse

me, I've laundry chores before bed." She glanced at Mrs. Baird. "May I heat water in the kitchen?"

"Aye, the kettle's on the stove, though I'm happy to wash yer clothes if you like."

"No," she said, unwilling to explain the greasy stockings. "Thank you, but I can see to the task myself." Heat flushed her face, and Mrs. Baird made an "ah" sound. Clearly, she assumed Rose meant undergarments—which was fine, so long as there was no more probing into this latest humiliation she'd suffered.

Minutes later, Rose took the kettle of hot water to her room. She grabbed the bar of Tilly's lavender soap, and after making a sudsy bath in the washstand basin she peeled out of her shoes and greasy stockings, then washed her feet—they were indeed like prunes—before putting the stockings to soak in the soapy water.

She eyed herself in the mirror. "You tried doing right by those girls yesterday, but what good did it serve?" she asked herself. "Now they think you're a namby-pamby."

But how was she to manage them without going to Mrs. Nash? Rose could ill afford to have her supervisor think her unfit for the task. It might cost her the job and destroy her plans for her and the boys' future.

"Where's your courage, Rose?" She frowned in the mirror. "As long as you continue to be weak, the bullying will not stop." Hadn't she learned that from Julien and her uncle?

Heartbreaking sobs from the next room suddenly drew her attention. Rose put her ear to the wall. *Hannah?*

The pitiful wails continued, and she glanced at her bare feet, then tiptoed from her room down to the next door. She knocked softly. "Hannah dear, are you all right?"

The door flew open, and the teary-eyed girl grabbed her arm and drew her inside. Rose immediately noticed the feminine furnishings, so unlike those of the captain's room.

"Och, Miss Lockhart!" she cried. "The factory's Mixed Club dance was tonight at Border Hall, but Maw and Da said I couldna go!"

Rose embraced the weeping girl. Having been made aware of the various social activities available to young factory workers at Gretna, she again berated her own naïveté with Gladys and Colleen Saturday night—and then today with the oily boots!

"There now," she said gently. "It may seem like the world has ended, but your parents *will* come around. Meanwhile, you must be on your

very best behavior.”

“I will.” Sniffling, Hannah straightened. “But I dinna even ken how to dance!”

Once again the tears flowed and Rose recalled her own days as a wallflower, before Uncle arranged her marriage to Julien and then insisted she attend finishing school before becoming his wife. “Dancing is easy.”

The girl wiped her reddened eyes. “Would you . . . teach me?”

Her watery gaze held such hope. Rose couldn’t refuse. “I can show you a few steps.”

Hannah hugged her again, then said, “Wait here!”

She soon returned with the portable gramophone from the parlor and a few records. “My friends dance the Ragtime Waltz and some of the animal dances like the Turkey Trot and the Grizzly Bear!”

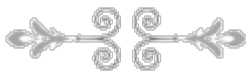
Rose chuckled. “Let’s start with the waltz. We’ll do it without the gramophone.”

After showing the girl the basic steps, Hannah was eager to put what she’d learned to music. “I’ve got a recording of the Military Waltz, so we can try that first. Then I want to learn the ragtime dances, because my friends say they play that music at all the socials.”

Soon the fluid notes of the popular waltz echoed through the room. Rose held out her hands for Hannah, and as they began the initial steps, the girl’s sturdy shoe came down hard on Rose’s bare toes. “Ouch!” Immediately she let go to reach for the offended foot.

“How clumsy of me! Miss Lockhart, are you all right?”

Rose tried to smile while her toes throbbed. “Let’s try once more, but this time pay close attention to your feet until you learn the steps.”



Alex reentered the cottage from the back after surveying the grounds and making a mental list of necessary chores. Because of Da’s injuries, his childhood home was in some disrepair and the yard needed trimming, though someone had weeded the garden—likely his sister.

He passed through the parlor when the sound of music reached him from the hall. He recognized the waltz, played often back at his airfield in France.

He found the source as he approached his sister’s room. With her door ajar, he leaned against the wall to listen, reminiscing about his

auld squadron and the men still fighting against the Huns. He missed them, but for now he had a more important mission close to home.

“Owww!”

He straightened at the cry of pain.

“Och, not again! Can you still walk, Miss Lockhart?”

Alex nudged open the door to find their boarder bent over, clutching the toes of one bare foot while his sister stood wringing her hands. She glanced up at him. “Alex, I’m glad you’re here! I canna seem to get the steps right for the waltz!”

Miss Lockhart straightened then and turned to him, her face rosy as she tried pulling at her skirt to hide her bare feet.

He fought his humor, certain she’d scurry back to her room. “So, Miss Lockhart is teaching you to dance?”

His sister looked forlorn as she nodded. Her face suddenly brightened. “Brother, you must ken how to waltz. Will you not dance with Miss Lockhart and show me how ’tis done?”

Admittedly, he’d enjoyed watching their prickly boarder change color and decided to add a bit more wood to the fire in her face. “Well, Miss Lockhart?” he said, approaching. “Would you care to show my sister by example? I promise I willna step on your toes.”

She tilted her head up to him, and her blue eyes narrowed as he held out his hand. It was a moment before she gave him hers while placing her other against his upper arm.

Once he’d settled his other hand against her slender back, Hannah restarted the music until soon he was guiding the woman in his arms across the floor, the rich notes of the waltz resonating through the room.

His mood softened knowing she’d been helping his sister learn to dance. Heaven knew that with the war on and their da hurt, Hannah had been pressed into work at an early age and had missed much about being young and carefree. He imagined she was eager to attend one of the chaperoned factory dances as soon as Maw and Da would allow it.

Whirling with Miss Lockhart around the room, he caught the faint scent of lavender soap, and beneath his touch, the warm, delicate outline of her shoulder blade. The top of her dark head barely reached his chin, and he was conscious of her touch, featherlight, against his arm.

Her other hand in his grip was damp, a sign of how nervous she must be while she kept her back arched stiffly, and he almost smiled. Prickly, to be sure.

His amusement faded, recalling her distraction during supper. Despite her assurances, *was* she having difficulties at work? After the stunt those two hooligans had pulled on her and his sister, Alex had no doubt the pair was trouble. For Miss Lockhart's sake, he hoped the lassies had apologized and then thanked her for saving their jobs.

"You both look so bonny dancing like that!" Hannah cried, clapping.

As he watched Miss Lockhart turn a deeper shade of pink, shame filled him. He'd been rough on her last Sunday, and all because the life he'd once known here at home had changed. It wasna her fault, and if she was to stay with them through the month, he'd need to make more of an effort to get along.

The final notes of music had begun to fade, and as they came to a halt, Alex hesitated before releasing her. "Thank you, Miss Lockhart. You dance very well."

"As do you, Captain." She averted her eyes from his.

"Where did you learn to dance the waltz?"

She looked at him then, her mouth slack, before the music started blaring again and his sister rushed forward with arms outstretched.

"'Tis my turn, Alex."

Miss Lockhart's shoulders eased. "I see your dance card is now full, Captain." Her blue eyes gleamed. "If you will excuse me." Turning to leave the room, she called back, "As you've been a flight commander, I am certain you will avoid trouble, keeping your sister's feet aloft so that she cannot step on your own."

She'd used his words against him. Then Alex caught another glimpse of bare toes as she opened the door and disappeared into the hall. A smile edged his lips.

Aye, he'd make an effort to get along with their new boarder.



GREटना

THURSDAY, JULY 11—TWO DAYS LATER

Are you familiar with the game of football, Miss Lockhart?"

Rose glanced up from her ledger notes to see Mrs. Nash standing beside her desk. Quickly she rose to her feet. "Football, ma'am?"

Her supervisor nodded. "We have several girls' teams here at HM Factory Gretna, and they not only compete with one another but also with other munitions factories in Scotland. Unfortunately, your predecessor, Mrs. Finch, lacked the constitution to participate. But you are young and fit and . . ." She beamed. "I want you to coach the football team for your section."

"Me?" At Chilwell, she'd once observed a group of female munitions workers practicing football on the west-end field. They'd worn bright red jerseys, red stockings, leather running shoes, and shorts that exposed their bare knees. Secretly, she'd admired their daring as she watched them play and had imagined herself in such a costume—before dismissing the idea knowing her uncle's reaction. "Thank you for the honor, Mrs. Nash, but I have never played football, nor do I know the rules."

"Rest assured, Miss Lockhart, you'll do fine. Most of the girls are amateur players, and I'll provide you with a playbook of instructions. Since many in your work area have already been on one team or another, you should catch on to the game fairly easily."

She placed her hands against Rose's desk, dark eyes gleaming behind the spectacles. "Your team will need plenty of practice—at least three days a week. Competition for the Challenge Cup is fierce, and the top Gretna team will play Carlisle at our Summer Sports Day on Saturday the twenty-seventh of this month. All factory workers receive a half day off to attend."

Rose's pulse raced. Coach a football team? "When should I start the practices?"

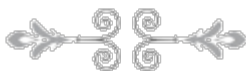
"Saturday after your shift." Mrs. Nash straightened and smiled. "That gives you a couple of days to prepare. Your team will consist of your eight girls plus three from the niter stores. They may choose their own team name and pick up their uniforms from the factory's Athletic Association.

"The practice field is nearby at Baxter's Farm." Her thin face sobered. "With the Challenge Cup championship just two weeks away, I'm counting on our day-shift teams to play well." She turned to leave. "Come by my office after your shift tonight. I'll leave the door unlocked, and your playbook, a whistle, and a coaching jersey on the desk."

Stunned, Rose barely nodded before her supervisor departed. She slowly returned to her seat. Her own jersey! Hopefully she could learn the rules of the game quickly, and since the factory players were amateurs, how difficult could it be?

Then she considered Monday's oily boots and, closing her eyes, pressed her palms together on the desk. *Lord, please help me to offer guidance and encouragement to my charges. And please let them appreciate my efforts.*

She opened her eyes to stare at her clenched hands. Especially those brash girls.



Special bird to arrive Monday. Keep in your sights.

Taking the train back into work, Alex continued to mull over Simon's cryptic note. He'd traveled into Gretna at lunchtime to send his report to Stuart and discovered the London telegram awaiting him.

Who was this "special bird," and why would they require his surveillance?

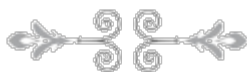
Could it be Rhymer? The possibility kicked up his pulse. In the four days since he'd hired on at the factory, Alex had explored every room in every department of the Site Three complex. On the pretense of inspecting both the quality of work and the equipment, he'd visited warehouse bays, cotton and niter supply stores, and the production of the cordite in each of its phases. And in that time he'd put to memory dozens of faces of men who might fit the saboteur's profile, watching

for any irregular behavior in the work areas and at their leisure in the canteen.

So far, he had little to go on.

As the train pulled up to the factory platform, Alex considered telephoning London from Timbrell's office. He hesitated. Weatherford had been adamant about maintaining security, which meant avoiding the risks of someone eavesdropping. Besides, if this special bird *was* Rhymer, then Simon—or Stuart—would have advised him further.

He drew a deep breath and exhaled as he entered the factory. Unless an emergency came up, he'd wait to see this special bird's arrival on Monday, though it wouldna stop him from wondering *who* he was to expect.



What had she got herself into?

Seated alone on the porch after supper, the playbook in her lap, Rose rubbed at her temples as she tried to memorize the football rules of engagement. There were strange terms like *pitch* and *penalty area* and *dribbling*. And which players were *halfbacks* and *backs*, and for goodness' sake, what was a *winger*?

Surely her team would think her daft if she failed to comprehend how the game was played. And she refused to ask for help from them, especially after learning her brash girls—Colleen, Gladys, and Betty—were to be the captain and her star players.

She frowned. A person could take only so much humiliation.

She'd retrieved the book, jersey, and whistle that Mrs. Nash had left for her in her office, and while she was there, Rose also made a telephone call to her brothers' school in Hertfordshire.

She'd used Aunt Delia's name and kept watching the door, terrified her supervisor would return at any moment. However, the call had gone through quickly, and Rose was relieved to learn Douglas and Samuel were back at school, though guilt preyed on her at having caused them so much anguish.

Yet they were safe for now, and she renewed her determination to succeed at her job, earning the money necessary for their freedom. And that meant she must learn the game of football, as Mrs. Nash was counting on her to take her team to victory.

The girls still needed to decide on a team name. Rose wondered what

they would choose. The three from the niter stores had also played before, so hopefully the team would require little guidance from her, since at this point she had absolutely nothing to offer.

“Have you ever played football, Miss Lockhart?”

She looked up to see the captain’s tall frame appear as he stepped out onto the porch. And for what seemed like the umpteenth time, her mind drifted back to their recent waltz together in Hannah’s room.

His power and grace in sailing with her across the floor easily rivaled Julien’s abilities, but unlike her fiancé, the captain’s hold on her had been gentle and she quickly lost herself in the dance, the melody and motion swirling and soaring her spirits high into the air.

Her musings quickly plummeted back to earth when the captain nodded toward the playbook in her hands. She snapped the cover closed. “I have not played, Captain, but I’ve enjoyed watching the game.” *Once*. She averted her gaze, then recalled the football in his room and looked up at him. “You have played before?”

“Aye, as a lad and then in college.”

He stood before her, balancing those same strong hands on his hips, and while she took in the wide set of his shoulders and lean torso, she imagined that power and grace from the waltz as he ran the ball down the field in his jersey.

Should she ask him to help . . . or would he refuse?

His condescending words of Sunday came back to her and she hesitated. *Courage*. “I wondered if you would mind terribly . . .”

“Explaining the game?” His hands dropped to his sides. “I heard you were going to coach Hannah’s team.” His green eyes held a glint, causing her spine to stiffen. Was he inwardly laughing at her?

“Of course I’ll help,” he said, as if reading her thoughts. “In fact, we can have a real football match here tomorrow after supper. You, me, Hannah, and the laddies. Just for fun. ’Tis the best way to learn how the game is played.”

Her eyes widened. “But I . . . I have no proper clothing for football.”

“I’m sure you can borrow a factory uniform.” He glanced toward the backyard. “I’ll set up the goal boxes tonight.” He turned back to her, his brows raised. “Well, Miss Lockhart?”

Her excitement warred with the propriety ingrained in her over the past six years. Yet gratitude at his willingness to teach her the game quickly melted away her hesitation. She smiled as she rose from her seat. “Thank you, Captain. I look forward to your instruction.”

And perhaps with his help, she would gain the respect of *all* her

charges.



Her moment of proving herself had arrived.

Rose left her office for the changing room at the end of the Saturday shift, her nerves on edge. After quickly washing and changing into her blouse and skirt, she withdrew from her locker the new red football jersey she'd worn for last night's backyard practice game. Captain Baird had been correct: playing a match helped her to make sense of the rules and terms she'd pored over in the playbook.

Now she would put that knowledge to the test.

Pulling the jersey on over her blouse, she then donned a borrowed khaki bonnet. Hannah had told her the "Gretna Glycerin Girls," as the team now called themselves, wore the same as part of their uniform. While Rose had demurred from wearing the uniform shorts, she would show her support in matching her team with the rest.

She reached for the whistle, tethered to a long ribbon Mrs. Baird had donated from her sewing basket. Slipping the length over her head, the action triggered a memory—Tilly, handing her the chain with the key and factory disk that would change Rose's life. Had it really been just two weeks since the explosion and her friend's death?

Swallowing past the knot in her throat, she closed the locker door, then considered the whistle in her palm. Never had she had a whistle before, and her uncle thought the devices too vulgar for her little brothers. She scanned the changing room—only a few workers remained—and then raised the whistle to her lips. Perhaps just a test to make sure it worked.

She puffed gently—and a white cloud of chalk erupted in her face. "Ugh!" She blew the bath powder away from her eyes, along with any hope for success in the coming team practice. Another prank! Would they never end? *Oh, Tilly, how I wish you were here!*

Retrieving a washcloth, Rose wiped her face, then rinsed out the whistle before exiting the factory. Fiercely she blinked back tears. As

with the oily boots, she refused to give those awful girls any satisfaction in their ploys to humiliate her.

Hopping the train, it was a short distance to Baxter's Farm where their practice was to be held. Hannah had invited her brother to attend, and Rose was much relieved to have discovered the whistle prank *before* she arrived on the field, especially in front of the captain!

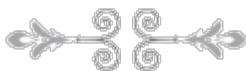
Mrs. Nash had given her directions, and once the train pulled into the next platform, Rose disembarked and made the short trek through town. As she walked the tree-lined streets, she observed the neighborhoods of compact cottages housing the married factory staff and supervisors, while in the distance stood rows upon rows of the dark wooden huts that comprised the factory's Timber Town.

When she arrived at the farm, she immediately recognized the goal boxes placed along either end of the pitch. Why hadn't the playbook simply called it a field?

Hannah and most of the other girls were doing stretches, while Gladys, Colleen, and Betty stood to one side. As if sensing her presence, the trio looked up at her and then covered their mouths, likely laughing over their latest stunt. Rose said a quick prayer that she would not fail.

The captain watched from the sideline, and his presence gave her confidence. He'd been patient with her during their practice match last night, showing her various player strategies and what to watch for in the opposing team. And just as Rose had imagined, his agility and speed down the field had equaled the grace and power in his waltz. She smiled as she remembered how he'd let her steal the ball near the goal, and she'd made her first point while Winston barked and tried to run circles around them.

Still smiling, she raised a hand to him. When he nodded, she turned back to her players and blew the shrill whistle as loud as she could—to the shocked and disappointed faces of the trio standing apart. “All right, Glycerin Girls. Take your places and let's get started!”



Coaching a football team hadn't been nearly as terrifying as she'd first imagined.

Rose's spirits were still high the following morning as she and the Bairds arrived for church. Once they'd entered in from the churchyard

to take up seats the captain had saved, she again found herself wedged in between Hannah and the man to whom she owed a debt of gratitude.

She warmed at the memory of last evening when the captain had stood watching as she coached her first team practice. Thanks to his tutelage, she'd surprised her star players with knowledge of the game, and she prayed it would be a new beginning for all of them. *Oh, Lord, I hope this is a sign that my being here in Gretna is a part of your plan!*

Stealing a quick glance at the man responsible for her optimism, Rose's mood suddenly ebbed, as the captain's stiff posture and the crease along his brow conjured for her a more recent memory—when he'd stalked into the church only minutes ago while she accompanied the rest of his family to Ian Baird's memorial in the small church cemetery.

She eyed the tautness in his rugged face. What could be haunting his conscience enough to keep him from remembering his brother? It was as though the captain were trying to escape his demons . . .

Rose could certainly sympathize. When Mr. Baird had begun the prayer at the stone marker of his younger son, she'd closed her eyes and imagined Duggie and Samuel's solemn faces as they'd stood before her grave. Heart aching, she'd prayed not only for Ian Baird, who had died on the battlefield in France, but also for forgiveness from her own brothers.

“Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past.”

Rose turned her head toward the pulpit as the preacher continued his reading of the Scripture passage.

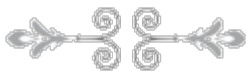
“See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up, do you not perceive it?”

A new thing! Once again, her hopes took flight. Was this not the sign she was looking for?

“I am making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland.”

Her head angled slightly as she leaned back against the seat. Perhaps it meant she *would* have difficulties while she was here, but that God was with her, clearing a path for the future of her little family.

Rose prayed that she was right.



Forget the former things. If only he could.

Alex sensed the slender woman beside him shift in the pew, and turning his head slightly, he gazed at her. Yesterday, Miss Lockhart had run her team through their first practice, and none of the lassies, save his sister, would guess that just the day before she'd kenned nothing of football.

During their backyard match, Miss Lockhart had stumbled down the field as she attempted dribbling the ball, confused between a gallery kick and being offside. Yet she'd been determined, to the point of obstinacy, to learn the basics of the game so as not to be defeated.

You could take a lesson from her, lad. Her courage came in trying to master a weakness—her ignorance of the game—while he, Captain Alex Baird, a flying ace in the war, couldna bring himself to stand with his family beside his own brother's memorial. Even knowing how his refusal hurt his maw and da, the guilt and pain were still more than he could bear.

He looked toward the altar. His faith had taught him God forgives all; yet until he could forgive himself, he'd never see the dawn break upon his soul.

New anguish filled him, and he bent his head, closing his eyes while his hands clenched into fists. *God, please help me to let go and rid myself of these ghosts so that I can find peace.*



GRETNA

MONDAY, JULY 15—NEXT DAY

It seemed his ghosts refused to leave, despite his prayers.
“Why are you here, Dexter?”

Arms crossed against his chest, Alex hid his shock the following morning as the dark-haired RAF lieutenant approached him outside the factory inspectors’ office.

Pain from the past flooded him; visions of Ian, waving farewell as he followed this scunner into Paris for another furlough weekend of gambling and loose women—the last of which led to his brother’s death.

Dexter’s brown eyes glittered. “I should ask you the same question, Captain.”

Simon’s cryptic telegram now made sense—the special bird he’d been told to watch. Yet it didn’t prepare him for this. “I work here. What’s your excuse?”

“Ah, there you are, Captain Baird!”

Mr. Timbrell rushed forward, somewhat winded. “I was delayed and sent Lieutenant Dexter and his publicity team on ahead, but I see you’ve met them.”

Publicity? Alex relaxed his arms and glanced at the two men standing behind Dexter. The first—a short, stocky man in rumpled linen suit—held a notebook and pencil, while the other aulder man sported a brown barge cap and carried a tripod and camera.

Alex turned to Timbrell. “What’s this about, sir?”

“A press tour, sanctioned by the War Office and the Ministry of Munitions. They hope to boost patriotism and support for the munitions industry.”

Why would Weatherford allow the press to visit Moorside of all

places . . . and in the company of Lieutenant Julien Dexter? “Mr. Timbrell, you’re certain . . . ?”

“Orders from the top.” Timbrell handed him a document, and Alex scanned the sheet. The order had been signed by a member of the Ministry Council. He frowned, recognizing the name. Dexter’s father, the Earl of Stanton.

“All three have been properly cleared,” Timbrell went on. “No coin, jewelry, or other flammables, and that includes flash powder.” He turned to the photographer. “Make certain to keep your distance in the restricted areas.” Then to Alex, “The lieutenant and his crew will be with us two days, Captain. I want you in charge of their factory tour.”

Alex reread the signed document, his anger simmering. Already he’d been on the job a week and knew the site’s layout, but why would Simon want him playing nursemaid to Dexter and his two-man band when Alex had a saboteur to catch?

Abruptly, Timbrell snatched the sheet from his grasp. “I’ll leave you to it, Captain.”

Alex blinked, watching the superintendent rush off.

“Since you work here, Captain, you must have been discharged.” Dexter sounded amused. “RAF cleaning house?”

Clenching a fist, Alex longed to wipe away that smug look. He couldn’t speak of the medical discharge, as it was part of his assignment—not that he’d ever tell Dexter. “How is it you’re here peddling publicity for your father, the earl? I thought the RAF needed their uniformed *lackeys* back in France.”

Dexter shrugged off the insult. “My father is on the Ministry of Munitions Council, and since I’m a decorated pilot in His Majesty’s service, what better delegate to lead this tour—”

“And spread your propaganda manure to all corners of auld Blighty?”

Dexter grinned, unfazed. “You haven’t answered my question, Captain. How did you end up getting ousted from the RAF?”

“An auld injury. I couldn’t fly any longer.” He told the lie as he locked eyes with the slightly shorter Dexter. “Too much scar tissue from last year’s burns in that . . . unexpected crash.”

Dexter’s aristocratic features colored slightly. He turned toward the man in the rumpled suit. “Mr. Underwood is a war correspondent for the *Times*, and this is his photographer, Mr. Holden.” The aulder man touched the brim of his cap.

“Captain Baird, you ’ave an idea where we should start?” Mr.

Underwood asked.

"Gentlemen," Dexter said, "did you know the captain was an ace pilot in the RAF? He and I flew together in the same squadron in France."

"You don't say . . . blimey, that's it!" Underwood scribbled away on his notepad before he glanced up, his pudgy face animated as he swept a hand across the open space above him. "I can see it now! The slogan for my article: 'The Military and the Munitions Man—Working Together to Save Our Tommies.' Brilliant, ain't it?"

"Indeed." Dexter flashed a smirk. "I say we get some pictures, Captain, before you take us around the factory. Holden, why don't you set things up?"

It took less than thirty seconds to assemble the tripod. "Forget it, Dexter," Alex growled as the photographer stood with his face hidden behind the large camera. "I'll escort you and this circus around the factory, but I willna pose like some freak in your sideshow."

"Not even for the good of Britain and her patriots?" Dexter moved to stand beside him. "It's also orders from the Ministry and the War Office."

"Ready!" Holden called out.

Dexter flashed his teeth just before the click of the camera.

"Take another, Mr. 'Olden," Underwood suggested.

"Capital idea." Dexter slung an arm across Alex's shoulders. "Be sure to smile this time, *Captain*."

Alex bared his teeth. "Get . . . off . . . me."

Instantly, Dexter dropped his arm, and Alex fought another impulse to plant a fist in the arrogant face. Now that would make a picture.

"I'd like to get a few more shots before we move on."

Dexter was obviously pleased with Underwood's decision, and while the camera's shutter clicked away, Alex stood rigid beside the man he'd once threatened with death. There was no doubt the lieutenant enjoyed being the center of attention *and* knowing Alex had little choice but to endure the farce.

He held his temper. Simon's instructions were clear, and despite his own animosity, he'd keep his eyes on Dexter and his press tour at Moorside. Not that he trusted the lieutenant any more than he would a Hun.

Relieved when the pictures stopped, he led the trio on a tour through Site Three. They headed first to the niter stores, where lassies worked to shovel caustic potassium nitrate into railcars to be taken to process

with other chemicals in making nitric acid.

From there they visited the cotton stores and then across the breezeway to the cotton preparation room.

“Your father must have pulled some strings to get you this tour.” Alex glanced at his nemesis while the four observed the lassies breaking down and shredding the enormous bales.

Dexter gave him a sly look. “It wasn’t my father’s influence at all, Captain, despite what you may think. My exemplary service record got me *invited* by the War Office to participate.”

Alex snorted. “Exemplary service record?”

Dexter’s dark gaze challenged him. “As stated in my military dossier.”

Alex’s jaw tightened. It was bad enough Dexter believed himself “a decorated pilot in His Majesty’s service,” but his preening about the other couldn’t go on. “I’m sure your ‘exemplary service’ was a slip of the pen. After all, we both know the truth.”

Dexter ignored him as they continued their tour to the nitroglycerine section. Upon entering the first door into a dim room, they watched several men in white coats—all chemists, Alex told them—processing glycerin with nitric and disulfuric acids in lead canisters to make the highly dangerous nitroglycerine used in cordite.

“Is it safe in here?” Dexter glanced at him, eyes wide.

“These lads know their job and take every precaution to keep the area safe, although”—he raised a brow, unable to resist—“an accidental bump to one of those canisters could send us all flying high without a plane.”

Dexter hurried to exit the room, and Alex smirked as he followed with the other two men.

They entered into the next open door marked ACIDS.

“Good grief! What *is* that stench?” Dexter wrinkled his nose as he fished a monogrammed handkerchief from his pocket and held it to his face.

“’Tis the acids used in nitroglycerine. Much like those also used for making the nitrocotton, the other component in cordite.” Alex, like most of the factory workers, had grown accustomed to the caustic odors in this section of the complex.

“I see only women here. Are they mixing the acids themselves?”

Alex followed his gaze. Several uniformed lassies worked with laboratory equipment at the tables. “No, but they measure the pressure and temperature of the acids and also adjust the strength of the

nitroglycerin solution before 'tis added to the nitrocotton."

"Some of them look sickly." Dexter leaned in for a closer look. "Should they not be placed elsewhere? Their carelessness could cause an explosion."

Despite the man's ignorance, Alex sobered as he eyed the young faces looking a bit jaundiced. "'Tis sulfur from the acid," he said and glanced at Underwood, scribbling away on his notepad. "Canary girls they're called, because of their yellowed hair and skin."

The journalist glanced up. "Does the yellow ever wear off?"

"Aye, but it can take weeks or even months before it fades once they're no longer in contact with the chemicals."

Nodding, Underwood went back to his notes. Alex turned again to the lassies. Now that Hannah worked in this section of the factory, would she change color as well?

From there he led the three men into an open, well-lit area with a half-dozen round tables, each housing a shallow vat. Four lassies, including his sister, stood at each vat kneading by hand the nitroglycerine with the nitrocotton to make the cordite paste.

"Blimey, I know what this is!" Underwood halted, pointing to the vats. "Sir Arthur Conan Doyle 'imself wrote about these ladies in the *Annandale Observer* a few years ago."

He glanced at his photographer, Holden, who watched the process with quiet intensity. "He called it 'mixing the devil's porridge.' Now ain't that a grand line?"

Holden merely nodded and began setting up his tripod and camera.

"They ain't wearing gloves either, poor doves." Underwood turned to Dexter. "What do you say to posing with one of 'em, Lieutenant? Maybe kiss 'er hand?" His pudgy face lit up. "What a grand shot that would make for the paper!"

"Surely you jest." Dexter eyed him with disgust. "They're probably claws by now. In any case, white gloves wouldn't induce me to risk being poisoned by that 'devil's porridge,' as you call it."

Alex curled his lip at the man's arrogance. He'd seen his own sister's rough, reddened hands, while Dexter had never known a hard day's work. When his lordliness ran out of money, usually by gambling, his father the earl extended his son's credit. And when Alex had threatened to shoot him out of the sky after Ian's death, the earl again bailed him out, arranging his transfer to Orly Airfield in Paris and a cushy job flying dispatches between France and London.

He should have taken his revenge when he had the chance. Already a

year had passed, yet he wouldna forget Dexter's part in bringing that spy, Olivia Charles, into Ian's life.

"Mr. 'Olden's all set." Underwood approached. "A few pictures in front of the vats, Lieutenant? And 'ow about you, Captain?"

Alex scowled in response, leaving Underwood to scurry back to his photographer. Soon Dexter stood poised beside one of the empty vats while Holden snapped a picture.

"Alex?"

His sister had finally looked up from the farthest table and smiled as she wiped her hands of the paste. Leaving her post, she approached while the other lassies watched with interest.

Miss Lockhart was not among them. "Where is your supervisor, Hannah?"

"She should be back soon. Sarah suffered acid burns, so she took her to the clinic." Hannah surveyed his companions. "What is this?"

He glanced toward Dexter and his press team. "Publicity for the war effort."

"Excuse me, can I get your name for my article, miss?" Underwood made his way back to Alex, pencil in hand as he smiled at his sister.

Hannah blinked. "Why . . . I'm Hannah. Hannah Baird."

"This charming creature is your sister, Captain?"

Dexter had strolled over as well. Alex glared as the man bowed to his sister and introduced himself. "I've had the pleasure of speaking with both your brothers, Miss Baird, and I daresay they did not exaggerate your beauty."

"Save it, Dexter. My sister's off-limits."

But Hannah ignored his words, blushing bright pink as she ducked her head. Peering back up at Dexter, she said softly, "A . . . pleasure to make your acquaintance, Lieutenant."

Dexter looked beyond Hannah to the others kneading the paste. "Fair ladies, the Ministry of Munitions appreciates all the work you do here to aid in the war effort."

They all giggled amongst themselves.

Alex chafed at Miss Lockhart's delay. She should be here, returning order to her lassies. Or would she too be taken in by Dexter's pretty speech and good looks?

He narrowed his eyes. Pretty speech or propaganda, the scunner knew how to spread his share of manure.

15



Surely it could not be . . .

Rose halted at the sound of familiar laughter, a chill crawling up her spine. Then the deep, distinctive voice—and she ducked behind a wide concrete post a few yards from where Hannah and the other girls were kneading cordite paste in vats.

Praying fervently, Rose peered out from her hiding place. Seeing his face, she hurled herself back against the post, her heart beating wildly. It was him! That . . . monster had found her. *Lord, please help me!*

Her feet urged her to escape, but instead she pressed against the concrete, nails digging into her palms as she struggled to steady her breathing.

She peeked around the post once more to observe the scene.

Captain Baird had his back to her while he, Julien, and another man—a short, disheveled fellow with a notepad—conversed with Hannah. A few feet away, a photographer stood with his tripod and camera ready to take a picture.

She cringed at Julien's charming overtures to the red-faced Hannah as Millie, Colleen, and Betty approached to join them. How did her fiancé know she was here?

"Captain Baird and I served as pilots together in France."

Her ears perked at Julien's statement. So they knew each other?

"They're also good chums."

The man with the notepad made the comment. Rose pressed herself back against the post. The captain and Julien were . . . friends?

That camera . . . she *had* caught a glimpse of the captain an hour ago, near the inspector's office. He'd been standing beside someone in uniform while having their pictures taken.

Because poor Sarah received such severe burns, Rose was too concerned with her crisis to take notice of the man *in* the uniform. And now he stood in her section, speaking with her charges.

Rose spun around and swiftly retraced her steps. Gritting her teeth to contain her panic, she forced her feet from doing an all-out run that would draw attention.

She could not let Julien find her!

Avoiding her own office—surely they would look for her there—she walked blindly toward the other end of the building, uncertain of her direction, knowing only that she couldn't hide in the factory for long. She pressed at her cramping middle, the lunch she'd so carefully guarded from any tampering now rebelling in her stomach.

With her nausea in mind, she made two more sharp turns to Mrs. Nash's office. Making apologies to her supervisor with an excuse of tainted mutton for lunch, Rose returned to the clinic where she'd taken Sarah and obtained a sick pass of her own. From there, she dashed off to wash and change and exit the factory as quickly as possible.

Once aboard the train, she stared at the building entrance, fearing that Captain Baird and Julien might emerge at any moment. But as the wheels began turning to distance her from the factory, she settled in her seat, watching as long as possible for any signs of them.

The train chugged toward Gretna's platform, giving Rose time to rationally consider the ramifications of Julien's presence in Gretna. The image of him and the captain together in front of the camera burned in her mind—and the fact they'd flown together in the war.

Was this a personal visit, then? *Oh, Lord, why of all the people in Scotland did Captain Baird have to be Julien's best friend?*

Did the captain know the truth about her? Julien could have shown him a picture. It might explain why they waited for her at the vat tables, since she'd told Hannah she would return soon.

The train pulled up to the platform, and Rose eased out a breath as she disembarked. Lifting the hem of her skirt, she half ran the entire distance to the Baird cottage, every so often glancing back for any sign of the captain and her fiancé.

She was breathless by the time she arrived to open the front door and step inside.

"Och, are ye all right, lass?" Mrs. Baird sat on the blue couch, looking up from stitching a piece of collar lace onto a snowy white blouse. A basketful of mending rested near her feet. "Yer face is as red as raspberries, and yer lungs are pumping much too hard!"

Putting aside her sewing, she stood and came to lay a motherly hand against Rose's forehead. "No fever that I can tell. What's happened to ye, lass?"

My worst nightmare. “I-I feel ill, my stomach . . .” She hated having to lie again, but she was desperate. “I think it was the mutton . . . a co-worker shared her sandwich with me at lunch.”

“Poor dear.” Mrs. Baird clucked. “When mutton’s a bit off, it can make ye feel queasy.” Her soft touch slid to Rose’s cheek. “What ye need is a lie-down, so off ye go. Mr. Baird is out back having his pipe while the lads play with the dog, so ye’ll have peace and quiet. I’ll bring a nice cup of my mint tea, since it worked so well last week to settle yer stomach.”

Rose smiled faintly and stumbled off to her room. Mrs. Baird could offer her a gallon of mint tea, but she wasn’t leaving her sanctuary tonight even if it meant going hungry. The mere possibility the captain would invite Julien home for supper made her shudder.

Mrs. Baird brought the tea, and afterward Rose changed into her nightdress and slid into bed. Sipping at the fragrant brew, she contemplated her future. She would have to leave Gretna—tomorrow, once Hannah and her brother left for work. But where could she go . . . and with what? She had no money left. Nor would she receive her first wages until Friday, and that was four whole days from now.

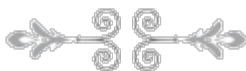
Could she hold out in this room until then? And how would she slip into work to collect her pay?

A chill rippled through her as she imagined getting caught and being dragged back to Leicester. Shackled as Julien’s wife, doomed to a marriage of convenience. And perhaps like her aunt, sent off to some asylum.

No! She set the rattling teacup and saucer sharply onto the nightstand. Never would she return to that horrible life; she’d bar herself in this room, feign the plague if she must.

There had to be another solution!

Sliding down beneath the covers, she tried to clear her thoughts, and eventually the tea did its work to soothe her nerves. Soon she found herself dozing. *Lord, surely you haven’t brought me this far just to fail. . . .*



Rose started awake a few hours later to the soft tapping on her door. “Miss Lockhart?”

Hannah. “Yes?” she whispered across the room, fearing Julien’s presence in the house more than the fact she was feigning her own

illness.

“Maw wants to know if you’ll be out for supper.” Hannah’s voice was muffled through the door. “She said she’d bring you more tea and a tattie scone, if you like.”

“That would be lovely, Hannah. Please thank her for me. I’m still too unwell to leave my room.”

“Och, I’m sorry, Miss Lockhart. And you missed all the excitement!”

Rose sat up, catching the word *excitement*. Had something more happened with Julien after she left? Curiosity made her slip out of bed and edge toward the closed door. “What kind of excitement?”

“Alex brought his friend, Lieutenant Dexter, and two newspapermen over to our work area today. They even interviewed me and the other girls! Can you believe it? The photographer took our picture too.” Enthusiasm bubbled in the girl’s voice. “Lieutenant Dexter also told us he and Alex flew together in same squadron in France.”

Nerves on edge, Rose listened again to what she already knew. “Is he . . . the lieutenant . . . staying to supper tonight?”

“No, he’s gone to the Gretna Hotel with the reporter and photographer. Tomorrow they’ll finish their tour of the factory and return to London.”

Rose closed her eyes and sagged against the door, making the wood creak.

“Miss Lockhart, are you all right?”

“Y-yes, only I must . . . return to bed. You go and have supper and I will see you later.”

As Hannah’s footsteps faded, Rose fell to her knees and said a prayer of thanks. Julien was leaving Scotland tomorrow! Perhaps his visit was merely a coincidence and he didn’t know she was alive or in Gretna after all.

But how could she be certain? What if the captain had been instructed to . . . to apprehend her once she made an appearance?

Rising to her feet, she began to pace the room, only vaguely aware of his boyhood memorabilia still cluttering the floor and shelves. She didn’t want to believe that Captain Baird—the same man who had danced the waltz with her and taught her the game of football—would stoop to such a despicable action. But what lies had Julien told him?

And yet, if it was not a trap and her fiancé’s presence here merely chance, the captain might have no idea she was Rose Graham.

Hope flickered. Since his homecoming, he’d not asked her any questions pertaining to Julien. And he wasn’t acting more strangely

toward her than usual.

Did she dare to believe her secret was safe?

Rose kept to her room the rest of the night. In the morning, when Hannah knocked softly at her door, she asked the girl to advise Mrs. Nash that she was still too ill to come into work and would need another day to rest.

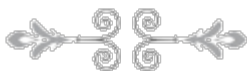
Hearing the captain's deep voice as he questioned his sister in the hall, Rose moved to the door once more and listened as Hannah relayed the conversation to her brother. His only comment was that he hoped Miss Lockhart's condition wasn't severe enough to warrant a doctor.

She released a gust of air when the pair finally departed for the factory. Slipping back into bed, she awakened hours later, again to a soft rap on the door.

"Lass? 'Tis noon and I've a nice pot of Scotch broth on the stove. Can I bring ye a bowl?"

Huddled beneath the covers, she listened to Mrs. Baird's kind offer while burning shame blistered her conscience. Hannah's mother had done so much for her already, believing her ill, when Rose's true malady stemmed from fear and keeping too many secrets.

Her mouth watered remembering her own mum's delicious meat-and-barley broth soup. "I am sure some broth would make me feel much better, Mrs. Baird, thank you."



By midafternoon, Rose had decided to become "well" and emerged from her room wearing Tilly's white shirtwaist and blue skirt. She carried her empty soup bowl to the kitchen, and while setting the dish in the sink, Mr. Baird's gentle voice floated in from the adjacent dining room. Listening a moment, she realized he tutored his young sons in mathematics. How grand to have a loving father teach his own children in such warm, familiar surroundings. So different from the months of isolation at boarding school.

She left the kitchen quietly, venturing into the parlor. Mrs. Baird sat in her usual place on the couch, the basket of sewing at her feet.

She looked up. "Are ye feeling more yerself, lass?"

"Much better, thank you. Your soup was just the thing, and I am sure yesterday's tea was most helpful."

Mrs. Baird beamed. "My own maw believed a good Scotch broth could cure anything that ailed a body." She pushed aside with her foot a damp, shredded wad of newspaper on the floor and patted the empty cushion beside her. "Yer welcome to join me, lass."

Taking a seat, Rose picked up the wet newspaper, a sinking feeling in her chest. "Where is Winston?"

"Mr. Baird put him on a long rope beside the porch where there's plenty of shade and a bowl of water. The dog was up to a wee bit of mischief with his newspaper."

"I am terribly sorry! Winston has never done that before." Though Rose couldn't possibly know since she'd only had him a short time. "Can I replace it?"

"Och, dinna fash, 'tis already forgotten. Anyway, the lads are doing their extra lessons now and having the dog underfoot would only distract them from their numbers."

Rose smiled her relief. "Winston has found two best friends in Fergus and James."

"Aye, and they'll all get their time to chase one another after supper." She leaned to sift through the mending basket. "Now, where did I put that piece of lace . . ."

"I could help you." Rose surprised herself at the offer but was glad she'd done it. Over the past couple of weeks, she'd noticed the constant mountain of mending and it was the least she could do, considering the care Mrs. Baird had given her.

"Mr. Baird did say yer maw was once a seamstress." Mrs. Baird eyed her intently. "What kind of work did she do?"

Rose bit her lower lip. The more she tangled her own past with Tilly's, the greater risk of her blundering and being found out. But it was too late to recant what she'd already told them. "My mum . . . she was a dressmaker and made the most beautiful clothes."

"And so ye learned at her knee?"

"I did." She smiled, wistful. "Mum taught me to cut cloth using a drawn pattern and how to sew the lengths together on a machine. I also learned how to stitch the finer pieces by hand, especially when a customer wanted lace, jewels, or even tiny seed pearls."

"I'm sure ye were a fine help to her, and being just a young lass near Hannah's age." Mrs. Baird's soft words matched the warmth in her gaze. "Ye must miss her fiercely."

Rose could only nod against the knot in her throat. She'd never stopped yearning for her mum and dad and now her brothers, and the

life they all once shared together.

Mrs. Baird handed her a needle and thread and the partially finished lace collar. "I miss my Ian, too," she said quietly, reaching back into the basket for a torn stocking and the darning ball. "I wish ye could have met him, Miss Lockhart."

She sat back and threaded a new needle. "Ian and Alex were always close and full of laughter and mischief, just like my Fergus and James."

At that moment, one of the boys—James—giggled loudly in the other room, and Rose and his mother shared a smile. Mrs. Baird fitted the darning ball into the sock and sighed. "Seeing my Alex now, though, I think the war and Ian's death have taken their toll on him." She glanced at Rose. "He's no longer the lighthearted lad I once knew. I'll admit to ye now without shame that I'm glad he's home with us again and out of danger."

"There is no shame in wanting someone you love to be safe." Rose looked up before dipping her head to begin work on the lace. What was her son . . . Captain Baird . . . doing at this very moment? Still leading Julien around the factory and learning more about Rose Graham?

"'Tis hard losing those ye love."

Mrs. Baird's sigh followed her words, pulling Rose from her musing. "I . . . yes, it is."

"I imagine it must be doubly hard being without yer family."

Instead of a lie, she held in her mind the image of Douglas and Samuel, still grieving at school. Her guilt and the longing to comfort them. "It can be." She glanced up from her stitching. "Still, I've managed all right."

"Of course." Mrs. Baird settled a hand on her shoulder. "Yer a brave lass."

So brave I hide in my room and pretend to be someone else. Rose forced a smile. How she hated deceiving this kind, generous woman and her family! Yet she had no choice, especially not with Julien close by.

Rose sought to change the subject. "Does your family always keep you this busy with mending?" She nodded toward the basket. "I cannot imagine that basket has shrunk since I arrived."

Mrs. Baird laughed. "I should hope not. After Mr. Baird's accident, I started taking in mending from the factory workers. I can assure ye, there are enough of them to keep me busy for the next hundred years."

Her skin flared. Of course! Why hadn't she realized the family would need the extra income? "Well, I shall help you as much as I can to shrink this basket down to size."

"I'm grateful, lass, especially that yer willing to finish the lace on that collar. 'Tis part of Hannah's upcoming birthday present. I've spent weeks making the green jacket and skirt in between all my regular mending. I ordered buttons from the haberdasher last week, and I pray they'll arrive by Saturday."

"If I can help in any way, I am happy to do it."

"See there? Ye have a fine hand at stitching." Mrs. Baird seemed pleased, and the two worked in companionable silence for most of the afternoon, listening to the children's voices or Mr. Baird's as he gave them instruction in the dining room.

The old mantel clock struck the hour of half past five when Mrs. Baird finally put aside her mending and rose to her feet. "Alex and Hannah will be home in an hour, so I must see to supper."

"Would you like help in the kitchen?"

"I'm grateful enough for the help ye've given me this afternoon, lass. Look at that."

Rose followed her gaze to the basket. The mountain of clothes had been reduced to a mere hill, easily tackled. "I shall keep working."

"Only if ye feel up to it?" Mrs. Baird gave her a searching look.

Rose started to rise. "I'm much better, thanks to you. Though I'll first go check on . . ."

"Winston!" Fergus and James shouted as they bounded from the dining room and raced through the parlor toward the back door.

"I think the lads share your concern." Mrs. Baird gave her a wink. "I'll fix the dog a bite to eat."

"That is more than a fair deal." Smiling, Rose resumed her efforts to eliminate the basket's contents. It was no wonder the poor woman found it difficult to keep up. The clothes seemed to multiply like the biblical fishes and loaves, with no end in sight. And each day she faced more of the same in order to help make ends meet.

Mrs. Baird was right—Alex being home and out of danger was good for their whole family. And because he'd secured a decent paying job at the factory, his wages should help ease their financial burdens.

She'd nearly finished mending a pair of trousers when the front door burst open.

"Maw, you'll never guess!"

Heart thumping, Rose glanced toward the entryway. How had an hour passed so quickly?

The needle in her hand stilled as dread clawed her insides. What if Julien had decided to stay after all, despite Hannah's assurances?

Would he and Alex enter the parlor together?

At the sound of approaching feet, she tucked the sewing aside and rose from the couch, blood pounding in her ears. She could still make it to her room.

“Miss Lockhart, ’tis good to see you looking well!”

Hannah burst into the parlor. She was alone. “And you’ll never guess!”

“Guess what, lass?” Mr. Baird ambled into the parlor on his cane and went to his daughter. Giving her a kiss on the cheek, he took up his usual chair. “You’ve good news, aye?”

Smiling, Hannah drew back her shoulders. “I found out this afternoon that when I turn sixteen, I’ll get a pay rise. An extra five shillings a week!”

“Such fine news, lass. Is it not, Miss Lockhart?”

Rose had retaken her seat on the couch, fanning herself with the wet newspaper. “That is the rule, Hannah, and grand news indeed.” She gave a feeble smile before glancing toward the door. “Where is your brother?”

“Alex said he had an errand in town.”

Rose gripped the newsprint. “With Lieutenant Dexter?”

“No, the lieutenant left on the noon train to London with his pressman and the photographer.” She sighed, her expression dreamy. “All the lassies in our work area thought him so braw in his uniform.”

Hannah glanced at her father, then grinned at Rose. “I invited him to come back on Saturday for my birthday. He said he would try, but that he’s needed in France.” She sighed again. “Perhaps I’ll invite him when he gets his next furlough. I’ll be sixteen by then and much more grown up than I am now.”

Beneath her smile, Rose’s jaw tightened at the mere thought of sweet Hannah falling into the clutches of a man like Julien Dexter.

She would pray the innocent young girl had seen the last of that scoundrel.

16



LONDON

TUESDAY, JULY 16

How typical of his father to choose a backwater town like Gretna, Scotland.

Julien Dexter resettled in the club car's cushioned seat and gazed out at the passing hills and trees and distant steeples as the train headed south. Surely the old man couldn't have known he would encounter his longtime rival, Alex Baird.

A bitter smile touched his lips. The two-day excursion was hardly enjoyable, thanks to the captain's hostility. Though Julien did have the satisfaction of seeing equal shock on his face when they confronted each other, then witnessing the captain's misery at having to chaperone their tour.

"The Military and the Munitions Man—Working Together to Save Our Tommies . . ." Julien almost snorted with laughter at the pathetic catchphrase. His gaze darted to its author, the pudgy Underwood seated across from him, still looking as if he'd slept in his clothes.

Alex Baird nearly bolted at the newspaperman's suggestion the two pilots pose together for the camera. Of course, Julien had planted the seed, offering Underwood that rubbish about their days of flying together in France. As if they'd been chums, when in truth Baird would have gunned him down like a Hun if he'd had his way.

Clearly, he hadn't forgotten or forgiven the mess with his brother and Miss Charles.

Reaching into his pocket, Julien removed a gold cigarette case. He regretted the day Kahverengi introduced him to that blasted woman. With the war on, the back-alley cafés of Paris had become a haven for gamblers and he'd been unable to resist. He'd found Miss Charles charming and attractive, but during his next furlough with young Ian

Baird in tow, she'd zeroed in on her new target.

He'd been relieved to dodge those amorous claws, though Alex Baird's little brother never stood a chance.

Taking out a cigarette, he tapped it against the slim case. Because there was nothing to be done or said to alter the past, he'd endured two days of Alex Baird's persecution in order to do his duty to the War office and to his father. Julien's mouth hardened. He should demand a commendation for his suffering!

He dug in his pockets for a match, then looked up to see the quiet Holden reaching out with a lighter. "Thanks."

Leaning back in his seat, Julien noted the photographer made no response. Why should that surprise him? Throughout the entire tour, the man said less than a dozen words, all of them "Ready!" before snapping his camera. Unlike Underwood, who never shut up . . .

"Once we get to London, Lieutenant, will you fly back to France right away? I imagine you're ready for a jolly time after Gretna. I 'ear they 'ave fine restaurants in Paris if you've got the quid, or maybe you like some o' those music halls?"

Speak of the devil. Julien drew on his cigarette, blowing the smoke toward the window. He stared at the unkempt journalist. "As if my plans were your concern, I'm leaving after I make a stop in town to visit my family."

Underwood leaned forward, his fleshy features alive with curiosity. "Ain't that grand? They'll be glad to see you. And when 'is lordship the earl reads my article in the *Times*, 'e'll be a proud papa."

Julien took another drag, letting the smoke ease from his lungs. It was more probable his father would be disappointed. To the world, the Earl of Stanton and his two sons were a stable, loving family; yet behind the façade, Julien awakened each day caught between his hatred for the harsh, unloving earl who had sired him and a piercing guilt at having ruined his brother's life.

"Your mother passed away years ago now and you 'ave a sibling, ain't that right, Lieutenant?"

Had Underwood read his thoughts? Julien eyed him sharply. "Why do you ask?"

Underwood blinked. "We always collect background details before writing up an article, Lieutenant. An older brother, in a wheelchair?"

"Percy." He struggled to form the single word as he took another pull of smoke and stared out the window. Criminy, they'd been mere children, playing in a tree house behind their country estate. Percy said

something to make him angry—Julien couldn't even recall what it was—and he'd shoved his older brother backward, never intending he should topple off the platform and fall several feet to the ground.

After Percy lost the use of his legs, their father accused Julien of wanting to hurt his brother, making him a cripple for the rest of his life.

He'd suffered from the incident as well; the years of self-loathing and his father's silent condemnation had ground away at his conscience. At every opportunity, the earl reminded him that he'd ruined his older brother's chances for a suitable marriage and the funds necessary for improving Stanton's coffers.

Dark humor caught in his throat. Perhaps his only saving grace was that dear Mother died of cancer and not in birthing him, or Father would consider him more of a pariah than he was.

"You were recently engaged to be married, ain't that right, Lieutenant?"

Julien snapped his head around, glaring at the fat-faced journalist making notes. "Do you not read your own newsprint, Underwood? Her obituary was in the *Times*."

Underwood's neck colored. "My condolences, Lieutenant, and the same to Sir Ridley Cutler and 'is wife. Will you be seeing them again? I imagine you all became close."

Julien ignored him, though Underwood's meddlesome questions conjured memories he'd rather have buried permanently. Like his failure to secure a fortune by marrying Cutler's niece.

Miss Rosalind Graham had been pretty enough when he'd met her last year at Cutler's Christmas party in Leicester, but her breeding was far beneath his station. And she'd been too naïve for his tastes; not the soft, willing European women he'd grown accustomed to.

He and his father had argued about the match, and as the earl always did, he threw Percy in his face. And each time afterward, when Julien flew dispatches into London and stopped by the house in St. James to check on his brother, if the earl was home, the marriage argument resumed.

It was Kahverengi who had changed his mind about taking Miss Graham to be his wife. While Julien argued with his friend that the earl planned to give her dowry to Percy as heir, Kahverengi suggested Julien demand stock in Cutler's munitions company, shares put into his own name so neither his father nor Percy could touch them. The earl wouldn't be around forever, and by marrying into the household,

Julien could induce Cutler to share his wealth.

And so he'd engaged himself to Miss Graham, and Cutler gave him the first half of the shares with the promise of the balance after the wedding. A wedding that never took place.

The train drew into London, and Julien observed the green valleys and forested hills had given way to small boroughs, then clusters of multistoried buildings and factories, signaling their imminent arrival at the station.

He stamped out his cigarette in the tray and thought ahead to what he must do. With Miss Graham dead and the loss of that future revenue, he'd had to resort to other means. And while Cutler had handed over to him the rest of the company shares for his "intent to marry," Julien knew his generosity stemmed from greed. The wealthy munitions magnate wanted to continue their arrangement, profiting by means of clandestine exchanges . . .

The train's blaring whistle drew his attention. He and the other two men glanced out the window to see the train had slowed considerably, about to enter Victoria Station.

"I hope ye enjoy yer family visit, Lieutenant."

Julien turned in surprise to the photographer Holden. "Thanks again for the light."

He gazed at the slovenly newspaperman, and his mouth twitched with amusement. Wouldn't the snooping Underwood kill to know that once he arrived at his father's town house in St. James, he planned to enter the study and pick the lock on his desk. Since Tuesday evenings were the earl's standing engagement at White's, and with Percy reliably upstairs napping in his room, Julien could take his time photographing any new munitions information his arrogant father brought home to keep in his files. Information quite profitable when shared with the right clientele.

His smile broadened. "Gentlemen." The train finally stopped, and he rose and grabbed up his bag from beside the chair. "I am certain I shall enjoy myself immensely."



Peacock routed back to you today. Nothing to report.

Alex scanned his response to Simon and then handed the coded message to Mr. Wylie, who had manned the post office in Gretna for as long as Alex could remember. Once it was sent, he offered another, this time to Lieutenant Stuart at East Fortune.

One benefit from the press tour was having access to the other sites at Moorside, and while he'd kept his eyes on Dexter and his crew, Alex also watched for any potential suspects. It could be a long shot, but a couple of names were now en route to Stuart at the airfield.

Having finished his task, Alex struck out for home. Relief at ridding himself of Dexter continued to grapple with his anger. He could still envision the lieutenant preening in front of the camera while the newspaperman recorded every word out of his mouth. Peacock surely fit.

Alex had also taken exception when the dodgy man slipped in beside Hannah and the other lassies to have his picture taken. Then last night at supper, listening to his naïve sister wax on about the "braw lieutenant" and remembering her soft eyes on Dexter when he'd tossed her a few pretty words.

A growl rose in his throat. For two days he'd suffered Dexter's company *without* being able to settle the score for what the scunner had done to ruin Ian's life.

After Dexter had introduced his brother to the so-called Frenchwoman, Ian returned to Paris every furlough anxious to see her. Then Miss Charles began writing letters to him at the air base about marriage and Alex grew uneasy. Part of his responsibility as flight commander was to censor his pilots' outgoing letters, and he'd confronted Ian when his brother wrote back accepting her plan that they leave France and marry in neutral Holland.

He'd reminded Ian that desertion was a death sentence. They'd even

come to fisticuffs over the letter, but his love-sick brother refused to listen. *"'Tis already too late for me, Alex . . ."*

Increasing his stride, he tried to outrun the memory of those last words. After the plane exploded and he stumbled and fell, he'd tried to revive his brother, gazing for the last time as Ian's dark eyes opened slightly, his ruddy good looks smeared in soot and twisted in pain as he whispered his guilt before succumbing to his burns.

Alex stared blindly at the road ahead. So many casualties he'd witnessed during the war, yet a part of him died that day watching his brother perish. Knowing he'd been the cause.

Dexter's claim of ignorance about Olivia Charles's true intent or where she could be found had nearly pushed Alex over the edge, and sweet heaven, how he'd wanted to have the earl's son arrested and court-martialed for treason.

But not if it meant implicating his own brother.

Alex rolled his shoulders, trying to ease the painful scar tissue. Never would his family learn the truth of what happened that day on the field, or the packet he'd discovered on Ian's body. Papers from *her*, written in German and hidden among some French stocks and bonds. Incriminating documents he'd been tempted to toss back into the flames.

But duty had won out. He'd met with Weatherford instead, and in exchange for handing over her letters to Ian, her photograph, even the documents, the captain agreed to ask no questions and promised his silence and an honorable burial for his brother. And in return . . .

The assignment at Moorside.

His spirits lifted at the welcome sight of home, and as he finally reached to open the front door, he let out a sigh. Dexter was gone, and despite loathing the man, Alex had done his duty as ordered.

He entered the cottage, and his thoughts turned to food as he inhaled the delicious smells coming from the kitchen. He headed in that direction, warmed at the sight of his maw, clad in her apron and making bannock bread in the skillet.

She looked up at him, her smile full of love. "Alex, 'tis so fine to see ye coming home to us every night, son. Did ye have a good day?"

"Aye." He smiled, forcing all thoughts of Dexter and his press team out of his mind—except for seeing their backs when they left the factory. "And the sight of you making me another home-cooked meal is like finding an extra guinea in my pocket."

"Och, ye rascal." She chuckled, removing the skillet bread from the

stove. "Tis almost time for supper, and everyone's in back. Will ye go and help yer brothers come in and wash up?"

"For your bannocks? No need telling me twice." He winked at her and left the kitchen, heading through the parlor for the back door.

Alex paused to see Miss Lockhart seated on the couch, her dark head bent over a jacket as she deftly worked her needle to repair a sizable tear in the sleeve. "Glad you've left your sickroom, lass. I trust you feel better?"

Her head shot up, the blue eyes wide in her startled face. "I . . . I am much improved, thank you, Captain. I think it was bad mutton in the sandwich I had for lunch yesterday. Your mother said the spoiled meat could certainly have made me ill."

Alex nodded. More than once he'd suffered the effects of tainted food while eating outside the air base in France.

He angled his head, observing her smooth ivory skin now rosy with color, much the same as when he'd waltzed with her in her bare feet across his sister's floor. She was a picture of health, a far cry from the whey-faced woman who had wielded his golf club during their first meeting. The memory filled him with warm amusement. Then it struck him that just a day after her ipecac mishap, and no doubt still feeling poorly, she'd gone into work to save his sister's job.

And now she helped his maw with the burden of sewing. His tone softened. "Supper's almost ready, if you'd care to join us tonight?"

"Why . . . of course, Captain." Surprise lit her features. "I need to finish mending this jacket. It will only take a few minutes."

With a brusque nod, he continued toward the back door and called in the rest of his clan.

Minutes later, while he supervised his brothers' handwashing, Alex replayed the conversation with Miss Lockhart in his mind. She had danced with him and they'd played a bit of football together, and while he was pleased they seemed to be getting along, she had yet to call him by his Christian name as everyone else did. And for some reason it bothered him.

He could still see the large blue eyes gazing up at him from the couch, much like a doe's before the hunter's strike. She seemed to him in that moment vulnerable, and tender . . .

Och, you've no business going there, man. Moving behind Fergus and James, Alex corralled them toward the dining room. His purpose was to find a saboteur who intended harm on his family, including Miss Lockhart, and that meant no distractions.

Dexter's sudden appearance had been enough to steer him off course; now that he and his press team were gone, Alex could resume his task. He only hoped the names he'd sent to Stuart tonight would produce results.

Why had the War Office sanctioned the tour at Moorside? Dexter and his newspaper pals had done nothing noteworthy.

Or had he missed something?

"Sit down, everyone, or this food will get cold before 'tis on yer plate."

Alex directed his brothers into their chairs, still mulling over the strange decision to showcase Moorside for the press.

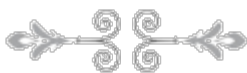
He frowned as a possibility struck. A play for power?

Prime Minister Lloyd George was once the minister of munitions and now head of the government. With Moorside the largest cordite factory in the country, had this so-called tour been his way of flexing Britain's muscle—showing off for her people *and* for the enemy with their prized war machine?

But that kind of vanity might discourage Rhymer from stepping foot inside the factory. Their saboteur could decide to choose another target altogether, and they'd be back to where they started.

"Alex, will you say grace?"

As Miss Lockhart had joined them, Alex looked to his da and nodded. Then, bowing his head, he had a last thought before reciting a prayer of thanks: to tell Simon to keep the politicians out of his way so he could do his job.



"You should have seen him, Miss Lockhart! He had ribbons and medals on his uniform and he was so charming! And when he smiled, Betty Pierce nearly fainted onto the floor!"

Rose set down her spoon, her own smile fixed while Hannah babbled on about the past two days of the monster's visit to the factory. Their meal of skillet-fried bannocks and Cullen Skink—Mrs. Baird's version of the haddock soup—was delicious, but Rose couldn't manage a bite through her clenched teeth.

Barely had she sat down and the captain said grace before the girl began a litany of praise for Lieutenant Julien Dexter—so much that Rose had been tempted to excuse herself and run to her room.

“Hannah, my lamb, ’tis obvious ye were impressed with the lieutenant, but ye did share all this with us last night at the table. Have a care for Miss Lockhart, and let’s talk of something else.”

Rose gave Mrs. Baird a grateful smile, but the mother’s words were no match for her daughter’s passion. “’Tis why I’m retelling the story, Maw! Miss Lockhart took ill yesterday and didna sup with us last night, so she doesna ken all that went on at the factory or how kind the lieutenant was to me.”

Hannah glanced toward her brother at the end of the table. “Tell her, Alex. Lieutenant Dexter is your friend, and you both flew in the same squadron.”

Sensing the captain’s eyes on her, Rose stared at her half-eaten bannock while fear knotted her insides. She’d overheard yesterday’s conversation at the factory but pretended interest. “Is that so?”

She looked up at him then—and quailed at the taut lines bracketing his mouth, the green fire in his eyes. *Did* he know the truth about her?

They stared at each other until Hannah said, “Well, brother, if you willna tell her, then I will.” The girl drew Rose’s attention. “Alex was his flight commander in France, and they fought the Huns side by side for over a year before the lieutenant transferred to Paris.”

“Over a year?” Mr. Baird glanced at his son. “So he knew . . . Ian?”

Rose ventured another look at the captain. His mouth hardened as his glittering eyes sought hers. “Aye.” He bit out the word. “They were of the same rank.”

He turned to his sister, and Rose eased back in her seat, dizzy over their silent exchange.

“Lieutenant Dexter is the son of an earl, Hannah, so you can forget your romantic ideas. Not only are you entirely too young”—his gaze narrowed—“but Dexter will marry for money, not love. And I doubt he’ll be coming back to Gretna anytime soon.”

“But I thought . . .” Her expression fell. “My birthday. He did say he would try to be here.”

“I also heard him tell you his duty is back in France. There’s a war on, remember?”

She pushed out her lower lip. “I know it. I work at the factory too, remember?”

“Anyone for marmalade pudding?” Mrs. Baird rose from the table, her concerned look bouncing between her eldest son and daughter.

“Thank you, Maw, but I’ll have my share of the sweets later.” The captain shoved back his chair. “We’ve some timber in the back, so I’ll

work off your fine meal chopping wood. Best to get it cut and stacked now before the winter months.” He nodded at Rose. “Miss Lockhart.”

Once he’d left, Hannah sat looking unhappy while her mother brought in a tray of the orange bread pudding. Rose took her cue to leave. “Dessert looks delicious, Mrs. Baird, but I would like to go outside and check on Winston and get a bit more mending done before bed.”

“Ah, lass, yer a blessing.” She smiled.

Leaving the dining room, Rose headed through the parlor and then paused at the basket of unfinished clothes. Why not take the mending outside? The evening was mild, and she would spend some time with her little dog as well.

She carried her sewing out back, placing the basket beside her wicker chair. Walking to the end of the porch, she caught sight of Winston lying in the grass and looking as dejected as she felt at the moment, especially after listening to Hannah’s chatter about Julien.

There was also the captain’s glowering at her all through supper. And what about his warning to Hannah? *“He’s the son of an earl . . . when he marries, he’ll do it for money, not love.”*

He’d been right to caution his sister, but was there more to his meaning? Did he know her uncle was wealthy and that Julien had intended to marry her . . . and perhaps did still?

Despite the warm July air, she rubbed her arms and descended the steps to the grass. She lifted her little dog and cuddled him close as an overwhelming sense of loneliness engulfed her. She longed to see the little brothers she’d left behind, her own family.

As soon as she received her wages, she must make plans to leave this place. Her pay would be a bit scant as she’d missed two days of work, yet it would buy her a train ticket and a few nights in a hotel and food until she found work in a city where no one knew her.

What kind of believable excuse could she offer Mrs. Nash for leaving? She’d need a referral letter from her supervisor if she was to find another decent paying job.

The loud *crack* of splintering wood caught her attention. Rose glanced toward the far end of the backyard, where the tall captain wielded his ax. With a powerful downward thrust, the blade split the large chunk of wood in two, the halves tumbling off either side of the chopping block.

He paused, taking up the pieces to toss them into a pile before he grabbed a fresh piece of wood and, with the ax in hand, began

chopping anew.

Rose moved onto the porch with Winston, and after releasing him she settled into her seat and resumed her mending. She occasionally looked up to watch the captain and found the cadence of his motion, combined with the sounds of the ax, oddly calming.

Even in her lulled state, however, she couldn't forget the real issue. Did he know her true identity, and if so, had Julien instructed him to spy on her?

Where would she go now? With limited wages and the clockmaker forger now an impossible situation, she couldn't return to Glasgow. Perhaps farther north or to the west? She'd heard about Nobel's factory at Ardeer.

The steady chopping continued, and Rose gazed at her dog, who seemed intent on watching the captain from the porch. He looked up at her then, furry ears perked, and her eyes burned. "I must say good-bye to you soon, my little friend. I cannot take you with me this time." She leaned to scratch him behind an ear, and the dog rose to his feet, emitting a soft whine. Rose looked away from him, blinking back tears.

The ax paused again, and she glanced over to see the captain had sunk the blade into the block and was pulling his shirt up over his head, revealing an expanse of toned, bronzed skin that made her blush.

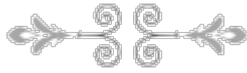
Rose stared at his broad chest outlined in muscle, the ripples of strength across his belly. He seemed oblivious to her as he retrieved the ax and continued hacking away at the new wood, the corded power in his shoulders and back flexing with his raising of the ax . . .

She drew in a sharp breath at the patchwork of scarred, discolored flesh along his upper right shoulder and back. *Dear Lord, what happened to him in the war?*

He twisted around then and spied her on the porch as though he'd heard her gasp. For several seconds, they stared at each other, the stillness of the evening air between them.

Finally he retrieved his shirt and shrugged into it. He glanced at her again before resuming his task, this time wielding the ax with an intensity she did not understand.

Rose returned to her sewing, repairing a torn seam in a blouse. Yet she found it difficult to concentrate, not only because of the sheer beauty of him but also the wounds that, despite his scars, seemed slow to heal.



Alex took out his fury with the ax for another half hour before he turned toward the porch to find Miss Lockhart gone. His relief mingled with disappointment at her leave-taking, and he again took up the blade, letting the wood absorb his guilt and his rage much the way he'd made her bear his frustration at supper.

By immersing his anger in those cool blue eyes, he'd endured the foul repetition of last night, his sister's endless blethering about Dexter. He'd also been able to answer Da's questions about the lieutenant's relationship with Ian, revealing none of his own pain, or the regret that threatened to crush him, and kept him away when his family prayed at Ian's grave. *Dear God, please help me with this burden. I dinna think I can carry it much longer . . .*

He lowered his head, his chest aching. And again he remembered those eyes, holding his gaze, keeping him steady and silent about secrets he could never reveal.

But now she'd seen his scars. Would she mention them to his maw? He loathed having to explain the wounds to his family.

Lifting his face to the sky, he cursed his stupidity. Then he seized another chunk of timber for his blade and commenced chopping with a vengeance.

They would never forgive him. Any more than he could forgive himself.



ST. JAMES SQUARE, LONDON
TUESDAY, JULY 16

Having left the train station, Julien arrived at the impressive Georgian home near St. James Square and circled around back toward the servants' entrance. Because most of the staff would be at their evening meal, he intended to slip inside unnoticed and avoid old Ames at the front foyer, instead using the servants' stairway that led into the main house.

"Yer lordship! Ye half scared me t'death!" The chubby maid clutched at her ample bosom as he nearly collided with her when she exited the workroom off the servants' hall. "I thought ye were a robber stealin' in 'ere, and still the light o' day!"

"Ida." Julien smiled, mentally cursing the interruption. "Why are you not at supper?"

"I was jus' on my way." She gazed at him with those cow eyes, reminding him of their last dalliance. "Why are ye here, m'lord?"

"Because I *do* want to steal something," he said and leered at her.

"But not here." He glanced down the length of the hall, relieved it was empty.

Red-cheeked, she placed her hands on her wide hips, her tone saucy. "An' what d'ye plan on takin' this time, m'lord?"

He drew her toward the back stairs leading up to the main floor and, after guiding her up the first two steps, turned her around so that they were eye to eye. "Now, what do you think?" He leaned in and gave her a quick kiss, and when it was done she covered her mouth in a giggle. He held a finger to his lips. "Promise you won't tell?"

She nodded, the dark curls bobbing below her mobcap. "I swear, m'lord. Not a word."

"Good girl." He went around her to climb the staircase.

“Will ye be wantin’ another . . . later, m’lord?”

Turning on the steps, he sighed. “I wish I could stay, Ida. But I’m needed back in France.” He reached out and touched her on the nose. “Hold that thought for the next time.”

Again her plump cheeks suffused with color and she gave another giggle, this time revealing several missing teeth.

He turned his back on her, heading quietly up the stairs. An unexpected delay, but the drab little bird *would* keep his secret.

Making his way across the main floor, he was glad most all the servants were downstairs. He avoided the entryway, where Ames the butler took up his post, and cut through the drawing room instead, heading toward the library and his father’s study.

To date, his forays had been quick and undetected. Afterward, he’d look in on his sleeping brother, then take an evening flight out of Kenley back to Paris where he would process the film before his planned meeting with Kahverengi.

He did enjoy the Greek arms dealer’s eccentricities. They always met privately and most often in cemeteries around the city. Kahverengi would send him the name of the graveyard and a particular tombstone, along with two sets of numbers: a day and a time for their rendezvous.

The next was one week from now—the twenty-third—at dawn.

He was passing by the carpeted stairway leading up to the bedrooms when the new valet, Darby, descended. “Good evening, Lord Julien.”

“Ah, good evening, Darby. Settling in all right? Everything shipshape?”

“Aye, m’lord, though his lordship your father took ill this morning. He’s resting quietly upstairs.”

That was a near miss. Julien’s pulse thumped at his throat. His father wasn’t at White’s this evening. “How ill is he?”

“I believe it is the arthritis, m’lord. Quite painful. The doctor has seen him and given him a sleeping draught.”

Julien’s shoulders eased. His father would sleep for hours. “Thank you, Darby.”

“Will you need assistance later, m’lord?”

Julien shook his head. “I’m only here for a short while. I’ll look in on Lord Percy.”

“Very good, m’lord.” Darby gave a slight bow and continued on, no doubt heading belowstairs to have his supper with the rest of the staff.

Once he was inside the study, Julien pushed the door closed with his heel and strode over to the desk. He withdrew his gold cigarette case

and removed the tiny set of picks. Crouching on one knee, he inserted them into the lock, moving the tiny tools around until he heard the familiar click and was able to open the drawer.

He spied the top file marked CONFIDENTIAL and grabbed it, setting it on the desktop. He stood and opened the folder to the first page. Seeing the recent date stamp, a thrill rushed through him knowing the new information would reap him a fortune.

Of course, it had been Kahverengi's idea when he'd hinted at this particular means of revenue, insisting that any inside information on munitions would be extremely valuable to the right buyer. Julien had needed no further explanation. With his own father on the Munitions Council, thinking the sun rose and set on his service to the minister, it was easy enough to discover a gold mine of intelligence tucked away in the earl's desk. Detailed plans for the future of Britain's armaments industry for which Kahverengi paid him well.

Until recently, Julien had limited his operation exclusively to his friend. He owed the arms dealer a great debt after that final evening at *Dés Chanceux* in Paris. The popular café had been his regular gambling haunt during weekend furloughs, where booze and women flowed freely and he'd nearly paid with his life for a rather long streak of bad luck.

His debts reached a level that even his father the earl couldn't afford to pay. As Julien left the Paris club that night, the house thug had confronted him, threatening to take what was owed in blood. Then suddenly the man Kahverengi was there, settling his huge sum and taking him under his wing.

How would he react knowing Julien had started sharing the same information with Cutler? To what degree did their financial paths cross?

He reflected on his most recent dealing with the weapons magnate, when the niece, Julien's future bride, had walked in on their negotiation. He'd thought by roughing her up a bit to scare her into obedience, but that failing, he'd planned to make arrangements after they wed. Though it was 1918, and having one's wife put away was a difficult and dirty business. In the end, it was a relief knowing she was gone and could tell no tales.

Cutler had paid him quite handsomely too, nearly as much as Kahverengi for the same information. Miss Graham's wealthy uncle seemed obsessed with competing for Nobel's share of the munitions market.

Julien scanned the information on the first page as he withdrew a small camera from his tunic pocket. More than once he'd considered telling Kahverengi about Cutler's desire for the information—test the waters, so to speak. But what if his Greek friend forbade him? Cutler's money was too good, and he didn't want to have to stop dealing with the man.

He raised the camera, checking the lens before he was ready to snap a picture.

"Julien?"

Blast. Quickly he closed the file. Apparently, he hadn't completely shut the study door. Why wasn't his brother napping? He pocketed the camera as he slowly turned around. "Percy, how did you get down here? I saw Darby headed downstairs for supper."

"He forgot my stained shirtfront, so he returned and I asked him to carry me down."

His brother's long torso seemed to overshadow the wheelchair the servants kept at the foot of the landing. Percy's pale features creased as he inclined his head. "Why are you here in London?"

Julien positioned himself in front of the closed file. "I came to see you, Brother." He nodded back toward the desk. "I wanted to write a quick note to Father first. I heard he has not been well?"

"His joints again." Percy used his muscled arms to maneuver the wheelchair forward, coming to halt beside the desk.

Julien's pulse pounded, wondering how much of the file his brother could see.

Percy made no mention of it. "How was your press tour in Scotland?"

"It went well. Quite a few ladies working for the war effort there, and lots of pictures were taken. I believe the *Times* shall do the event justice." As he spoke, Julien glanced at his watch. Just thirty minutes to catch the last train to Kenley Airfield, and it would take him half that long to walk back to Dover Street for the tube to Victoria Station. He tried to quell his impatience. "How are you doing, Percy?"

His brother shrugged in the chair. "I have my usual aches and pains, but my stamp collection takes my mind off things and keeps me busy."

"I imagine you've got quite a collection by now." He fought another urge to look at the time.

"Yes, quite." The subject seemed to enliven his brother. "I've just acquired a rare stamp from Spain and one from Norway. I find it fascinating to see how other countries determine their designs."

“Indeed.” Julien’s chest tightened. *Dear brother, you could go to those countries instead of collecting idiot stamps, if I hadn’t crippled you.*

His guilt intensified as Percy sucked in air through his teeth, raising himself up before resettling into the wheelchair. “I read Miss Graham’s obituary in the newspaper two weeks ago. Were you able to attend her memorial service in Leicester?”

“Sadly, no.” Julien desperately needed to escape. “I was stuck in France. Which reminds me—” at last he glanced at his watch—“I need to catch the last train if I’m to make it into Paris tonight.”

“Of course, you must not be late.” Percy eyed the desk, then his brother. “Shall I give your note to Father?”

“Unfortunately, I did not get that far with my letter.” He offered a weak smile. “I’ll send a postcard from Paris. Please give him my regards.”

Percy nodded and backed the wheelchair away from the desk. “I’ll just wait outside the door and then see you out. Ames is getting a bit feeble.”

Julien could only nod, guilt and shame coursing through him.

While his brother hovered outside, he slipped the file back into the drawer. He hadn’t expected this enterprise to sour. He’d promised Kahverengi the information, but now he must meet with him empty-handed. There was no way he could chance returning to the house before next week to obtain copies of the documents. Would his friend be cross?

Departing the study, he followed Percy to the front door, where they said their good-byes in front of the surprised old butler. Once outside, he again debated whether or not to stop his dealings with Cutler. The money was exceptional, and with Miss Graham out of the way, their arrangement could go on smoothly without any strings.

Both of his patrons had so far paid him well, and when Cutler’s investments grew, Julien’s stock value increased. He dreamed of the day he could walk into the house and toss a wad of banknotes into his arrogant father’s face. He also planned to take care of Percy, so his brother needn’t worry for anything the rest of his life.

But that was the future; at present he could ill afford to end up on the wrong side of things, and if Julien must choose, he’d be taking far more risk to incur the arms dealer’s revenge.

19



LONDON

WEDNESDAY, JULY 17

Well, so much for our efforts, Quinn. Seems this latest plan failed.” Sunlight streamed through the tall windows in Marcus Weatherford’s Admiralty office as he hung up the telephone and gazed across the desk at the swarthy detective with Scotland Yard’s Special Branch. “I just spoke with Captain Forrester. According to Captain Baird’s telegram yesterday, our lieutenant made no attempt to contact anyone while at Moorside.”

Quinn frowned as he scratched at a red, scaly patch of skin near his right temple. “Any possibility Lieutenant Dexter caught wind of the ruse?”

“I doubt it.” Marcus leaned his elbows on the desk. “There was no way he could have known the press tour was just a ploy. No one at the factory knew, including Captain Baird. And Underwood assured me his cover as a journalist was convincing. On their return trip to London, he made a point of asking the lieutenant about his family and his relationship with Sir Ridley Cutler of Cutler Enterprises, whose niece—before her untimely death at Chilwell—was Dexter’s intended bride. He even asked about Dexter’s activities in Paris, yet he claims the lieutenant didn’t strike him in any way as being suspicious.” He paused, giving a slight smile. “Just full of himself.”

Quinn tipped his head. “You never told me why you suspected him in the first place. Maybe he’s just not our man?”

“You could be right, but when we saw the name Moorside on the charred munitions list Paris found in Kahverengi’s flat, we suspected a leak high up in government. That code name is not public information.” He clasped his hands. “MI5 is surveilling all members of the Munitions Council and their family members. The list includes

Lieutenant Dexter, since his father, the Earl of Stanton, is on that council.

“A few days ago, I returned from France with a report that the lieutenant was seen weeks ago at the Montparnasse Cemetery in Paris just after dawn. There was another man with him, believed to be in one of the photos we have on the arms dealer. We suspect Dexter met with Kahverengi to barter information obtained from his father, though I doubt the earl is involved.”

“Why rule it out, Captain? It would not be the first time someone from the peerage stooped to selling secrets.”

“True, but I’m well acquainted with Stanton. He and his younger son have a rather strained relationship. I cannot envision them in league with one another.”

“Stranger things have happened.”

“Indeed they have,” Marcus agreed. “But you asked why I suspected Dexter and it was because of the French report. If he does have dealings with Kahverengi, then it’s likely he’s also connected with his agent, Rhymer. I arranged with the site superintendent Timbrell to have Captain Baird accompany the lieutenant on his press tour, hoping Dexter would try to make contact with our saboteur.” He paused. “If we’d been successful, it could have saved countless hours of manpower and protected thousands of workers in that factory.”

Again the detective scratched at the red scab at his temple. “Has the lieutenant returned to France?”

“Yes, he flew out of Kenley last night. MI5 recently installed a man in the earl’s home, surveilling for any possible security breach. So far, he’s had nothing to report.”

“So we just stand by and wait?”

Marcus nodded. “The MI5 agents at Moorside’s other sites have nothing to report, though Captain Baird took Dexter through those facilities and came up with two names he sent to his liaison in Scotland. We’ll have to see if anything comes of it.” He sighed. “I still regret that Miss Lockhart slipped through our net. It’s obvious she failed to fulfill her end of the deal, despite all our planning. She never met with Rhymer.”

“What if she did meet with him?” Quinn’s dark brows drew together. “I checked her work locker afterward. The package he sent her was empty, which tells me she delivered into the factory the dummy charges we’d replaced for his bombs. Perhaps Rhymer never trusted Till . . . Miss Lockhart, and he went ahead and planted his own

explosives.”

“I find it too coincidental that she fled from the factory just *before* the explosion.” Marcus opened his file, skimming the report. “It states here she left by the factory’s rear gate at 1840 hours that evening, enough time to get away before the blast.”

He looked up at Quinn. “I think she changed her allegiance and tipped Rhymer off to our plan. Kahverengi has millions. If he’s funding this sabotage as we believe, he could easily afford to send Miss Lockhart to live in luxury wherever she chooses.”

“We have circulated her photograph at all our offices, Captain. Also with the major ports, here and in Scotland, in the event she tries to leave the country.”

“That will help.” He closed the file. “In the meantime, I’d like you to retrace her steps, including her history. Start at the orphanage in Glasgow and work forward, including her past contacts. Whether she’s guilty or innocent of the Chilwell explosion, we need to determine her whereabouts.” He narrowed his eyes on Quinn. “She’s still our key to finding Rhymer and putting Kahverengi out of business.”

20



GRETN

FRIDAY, JULY 19

Excuse me, Mrs. Nash? Did you say I have no wages coming?”

Rose stood at her supervisor’s desk, heart thumping. She’d already missed two days of work after barely starting a new job because of Julien. Was she about to get the sack before she could even resign her post?

Any hope for a recommendation letter now seemed lost. “I am terribly sorry about my recent absence—”

“It’s not what you think, Miss Lockhart, and I’m relieved that you’ve recovered from food poisoning.” Mrs. Nash left her chair and came around to stand beside her. “The truth is . . .” She nudged the spectacles farther up her beaked nose. “According to our pay office, there is no Miss Tilda Lockhart.”

Rose took a step back, the breath stuck in her throat. Had she been found out? “I . . . I do not understand.”

“How could you?” Mrs. Nash crossed her skinny arms and leaned against the edge of the desk. “I only found out myself after lunch. You’ve been using the temporary factory disk I gave you when you hired on, and so I called the main office about your permanent one. That’s when I learned the employment paperwork had simply vanished.”

She shook her head. “The documents were sent by courier to the files office after you hired on, but the clerk in charge of processing was suddenly taken ill. Another stepped into his place, and somewhere in the interim, your paperwork never resurfaced. As a consequence, I’m sorry to say your name was never forwarded to the paymaster in the Wages Office.”

Rose sat down in the hardwood chair across from Mrs. Nash, her

mind boggled at the maze of details her supervisor had relayed. Yet one fact stood out: The secret of her identity, at least at the factory, was still safe. Her chest eased. "So . . . I will receive my wages?"

"Yes, of course, but unfortunately not until Monday. A copy of your documents is being hand-walked to the main office now." She pushed away from the desk and laid a hand on Rose's shoulder. "I'm very sorry this has happened, Miss Lockhart. I know you've already had to wait two weeks. If you are in desperate need of funds, I would be happy to make you a small personal loan after the shift today, just come and find me."

"Thank you." Rose struggled to inject gratitude into her words before she left and walked back toward her own office at the far end of the building.

Misery loomed over her like a dark shadow. It seemed the week only determined to get worse. First there was Julien's sudden appearance; then at football practice on Wednesday, her brash girls were back to being secretive and laughing behind their hands. And yesterday, Rose discovered the reason why—when she'd donned her work smock and discovered *someone* had put live earthworms in both pockets.

Fortunately, Dad had taken her fishing on a few occasions; otherwise when she'd plunged her fingers into the nest of squirming creatures she might have screamed—giving those brazen girls plenty to laugh about.

Today, their tricks found her at break time in the canteen when she'd purchased a cup of watery tea with Tilly's last coin. After adding to her drink the small amount of precious sugar Mrs. Baird had spared from her rations, Rose took a sip—then nearly spit out the bitter brew as the sugar in her locker had been replaced with salt.

With Gladys and Colleen conspicuously absent from the usual table of girls, Rose had no doubt they were off crowing over their latest prank. What could she expect? Her own absence Monday and Tuesday had simply given those rotten girls more time to devise new tortures!

Slowing her steps, she blew out a sigh. She was in over her head—with this job and with trying to coach a football team. Certainly not equipped to supervise others, not like Tilly. And what about her future in Nova Scotia? Since sharing with the Bairds about her mum and dad, Rose had started to consider opening her own dress shop. But what if she had to instruct employees?

And now this . . . this . . . latest disaster with her pay! Frowning, she resumed her pace and soon arrived at the nitroglycerine section where her charges should be *working*.

Instead of going to her office, she marched toward the Acids Room. Enough was enough. She had to stand up to them today. If not, Mrs. Nash *would* discover her laxness and Rose could not hope to receive a good referral when she left.

Chin set, she fortified her nerve with Tilly's words: "*If you have courage . . .*"

"Ye stupid lot, if ye can't do the work right the first time, then get out!"

Rose paused as she neared the Acids Room, the angry male voice coming from inside.

"That's why we don't need no females doin' a man's job! Go home to yer mams and yer little 'uns where ye belong, so we can get our work done!"

Hannah and the girls from the vats huddled beside the door, trying to look inside. Rose nudged them back and crossed the threshold into the caustic-smelling room.

A tall barrel-chested man in brown barge cap and leather apron stood waving his fist at her charges, his meaty face contorted in anger. Behind him stood three other male workers, each wearing similar garb and looking on with smug smiles.

Instantly her mind conjured Uncle Ridley as he towered over her frightened aunt. Rose barged in on the scene. "What is happening here?"

The furious man turned at her approach. "Who are ye supposed to be?" He started toward her, and she instinctively took a step back, then halted. *Courage . . .*

Anchoring her feet, she raised her chin. "I should ask you that very question, sir, and then you can explain to me why you are threatening my girls."

"Ye oversee this lot?" The ogre laughed, glancing back at his three cohorts. "Why, yer no more 'an a girl yerself." He flashed an ugly smile. "The name's Dobbs and I'm with the union." He held up a piece of paper. "Our pal nearly died because of *yer girls!*"

He pointed to Gladys, Sarah, Jane, and Dorothy, who stood at the gauges table clutching their measuring equipment. Seventeen-year-old Jane tried to muffle her cough while sixteen-year-old Sarah, her face blistered from the acid burns, visibly trembled in place.

"One of these here got the pressure too high on the nitroglycerine tank yesterday, and this morning it sprung a leak. When our Joe tried plugging it up, he got drenched in the stuff and had to get a wash

down. He's got bad burns, and it's lucky ye lot didn't kill us all!"

Rose took a step forward. "Mr. Dobbs, I can certainly understand your reaction, but in future, if you have a complaint about the work, you will bring it directly to me."

"Bah! Ye don't belong here, either. This is a man's work and no place for yer kind."

Jaw tight, she was too incensed by his narrow-minded bullying to be cautious. Her feet inched forward a few more steps until she faced him squarely. "Mr. Dobbs—"

He grasped her arm.

In that moment, she relived her last encounter with Julien—fingers digging into her flesh as he pressed her up against a wall, instructing her on *her place* as his wife and how *he* expected her to behave. Never what she could expect from him or what she wanted.

"You will unhand me." Her raw voice, barely audible, reached his ears and he quickly released her.

She straightened the sleeve of her smock with trembling fingers and gazed up at him. "You are right, Mr. Dobbs, we should not be here. However, since most of *your kind* are off fighting in France and need munitions to survive, we women must fill the gap and do our bit to keep them alive. That means risking *our* health, *our* families, *our* livelihoods, and *our* peace of mind for your benefit as well as theirs and the rest of the nation.

"Furthermore." She crossed her arms to keep from shaking. "What proof do you have that it was my girls who over-pressurized the tank?" She glanced at the paper in his hand. "Is that the incident report?"

When he nodded, she held out her hand. "May I see it?"

He seemed reluctant so she grabbed hold of the sheet, her eyes narrowed. "Mr. Dobbs?"

He released the paper, and Rose scanned the report. "This states the leak was in tank number four. Is that correct?"

He scowled. "Like I said—"

"But, Mr. Dobbs, my girls have never worked with tank four. I can certainly check the work rosters to see who did, but I know number four is tested and operated on the night shift—by some of the men in your union, I believe? My girls work the day shift and have for some time." She thrust the paper back at him. "So you are quite mistaken."

He fisted the paper, his mottled face turning white. "Why, ye uppity piece—"

"Is there a problem, Dobbs?"

Heart pounding, Rose whirled at the sound of the familiar male voice. Captain Baird had entered the room and now stood behind her, feet braced apart and staring at the giant.

Relief at seeing him threatened the last of her composure. Knees wobbling, she locked them in place. She dared not wilt now. "There is no problem here, Captain." Again she managed a steady voice, returning her attention to the ogre in front of her. "Is there, Mr. Dobbs?"

He glared at Alex a moment, then at her before he finally took a step back. "I dunno why I waste my breath. Nothin' around here will change. C'mon, lads, let's get back to work."

Hannah and the other girls outside scurried off as Mr. Dobbs and his cronies pushed their way toward the exit.

Once they'd left, Rose eased out a breath and turned to the captain. His face held concern as he lifted a dark brow in question. She offered him a faint smile, and he nodded before retreating back into the factory.

Rose approached the workbench, where her charges stood looking dumbfounded. "Back to work, ladies. I would not wish to give that horrid Mr. Dobbs any other reason to find fault with us. He will never understand that you are the best thing that has ever happened to this war. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, Miss Lockhart." Sarah, Jane, and Dorothy wore relieved smiles while Gladys, a stunned look on her sallow face, slowly nodded.

As they resumed their work, Rose decided to postpone speaking with the troublemakers. Because of Mr. Dobbs and his nastiness, her head hurt and her heart raced and she needed a few moments of calm.

Once she'd checked on Hannah and the others mixing cordite, Rose sought out the washroom for some cold water and was relieved to find the room unoccupied.

Bathing her face, she stared into the mirror at her reflection. She didn't seem any different from this morning. The same dark-brown strands peeked out from her work bonnet, and blue eyes too big for her face still peered back at her.

She angled her chin. Perhaps it wasn't as weak as it appeared earlier? Had she truly stood up to that clod of a man?

Thank goodness the captain intervened when he did. Otherwise she'd feared Mr. Dobbs was about to grab more than her arm in his angry tirade.

Rose pressed her lips together as she tucked in the errant dark wisps.

She didn't fool herself; what transpired minutes ago could not compare with what Julien would do to her once he found her. Captain Baird had come to her rescue this time, but would he do the same where his friend was concerned?

Blotting her face with a clean towel, she took a seat on the padded washroom bench against the wall. She had to leave Gretna—though she dared not resign or ask Mrs. Nash for a referral letter until she received her wages in hand on Monday. That was three days from now. And tomorrow was Hannah's birthday.

She pressed against the dull throbbing in her head. Hopefully, the captain had been truthful with his sister, telling her Julien wouldn't return anytime soon. It would mean, at least for another day, Rose would be safe.

21



GREटना

SATURDAY, JULY 20

What would it be today? A snake in her work boot? Beetles in her hand lotion?

Rose cracked open her locker door at work the following morning, exhausted after a fitful sleep. She'd awakened several times during the night, always from the same dream: Julien, his hands full of earthworms, facing off with her inside the factory. All eight of her charges, clad in their football uniforms, looked on as they giggled behind their hands, while Mrs. Nash stood shaking her head at Rose in disappointment.

Captain Baird had been in the dream, too. Siding with his friend, he'd stood beside Julien, arms crossed and wearing his barge cap while he shot Rose a smug smile.

Then in a fit of rage, Julien threw the worms at her—except it was acid, burning her flesh as he announced to all that when they married he'd send her off to the asylum to join her dear aunt, and no one would see her again.

She jabbed a thumb at her forehead as if to shove the nightmare from her thoughts. No doubt her skirmish with Dobbs yesterday and then Hannah's chatter at supper last night were the cause. The girl had regaled the family with every detail of Miss Lockhart's "heroic sacrifice" for her girls, "putting her own life at risk" against Mr. Dobbs, the "meanest scunner to draw breath" while she stood up to him.

Rose had sat at the table, enough heat in her face to rival the steaming plate of mince and tatties Mrs. Baird served her. When finally she'd ventured a glance at the captain, he seemed amused with his young sister's theatrics.

Mr. Baird then asked his daughter what happened next, but Rose

quickly intervened to say his son arrived in time to diffuse any real confrontation. She'd been thankful at that point when the dinner conversation ended.

Today, however, as the captain and his sister rode in with her on the train, Rose was conscious of the steady green eyes on her. She hadn't forgotten his glaring at her over dinner a few nights ago, or his hostile look when she'd seen him chopping the wood. So different from the graceful man who swept her up in the waltz and patiently taught her the rudiments of football. But that was all before Julien's arrival. Was the captain now watching her and making mental notes to pass along to his friend?

She swung open her locker door, relieved when nothing jumped out at her. Exchanging her shoes for the rubber boots—after checking them first—she then removed her wristwatch, the only jewelry she wore into the factory. Afterward, she fished from her skirt pocket the five shillings Mrs. Nash had loaned her yesterday.

Rose had already considered avoiding Hannah's birthday supper at the Bairds tonight—and any risk of meeting Julien—by taking her evening meal at the Gretna Café in town. But Mrs. Baird had been effusive in her thanks after Rose finished the lacework on her daughter's present and insisted she join in the celebration.

And in truth, she dare not spend the borrowed money. Who knew what her future expenses might be while she searched for work in a new city? *Lord, please do not let that monster show up at the birthday party tonight!*

After stuffing the coins and her watch into one of her shoes, she narrowed her gaze on the clean, white work smock. Her other hung freshly washed on the clothesline at home after she'd emptied the crawling contents into Mrs. Baird's garden.

Plucking the smock from the locker, Rose held it away. She absolutely detested crawling insects. Had those bothersome girls got the idea to use spiders this time?

Taking hold of a pocket, she cringed as she drew back the cloth to peer inside.

Flowers?

Carefully she withdrew the posy of purple heather tied with a pretty gold ribbon.

The same gold ribbon Gladys had worn in her hair to the Carlisle cinema.

An identical posy lay tucked inside the other smock pocket, tied with

more of the gold ribbon. Rose eased her shoulders as she leaned against the row of lockers. It seemed the battle—with Gladys, anyway—was over.

Admiring the purple blooms and pretty ribbons, she was caught unawares as her throat grew tight. It had dawned on her the true value of the twin gifts, especially coming from a girl who likely grew up in the harsh poverty of London's East End.

Gladys Dunham, one of the toughest of her charges, wasn't so different from Tilly or even herself. They all needed love and acceptance, despite their backgrounds or the hardships they'd endured. Perhaps the struggles are what made it even more important.

Her own boarding school days had been long and painful being spurned as an outsider. The snide remarks and cruel words still had the power to wound her young girl's heart; and the ache of that loneliness often returned when she was frightened or despairing of her future. Perhaps no one had ever stood up for Gladys before.

Mutual respect was the answer. Tilly had managed her girls at Chilwell because she knew them; she'd been brought up rough like them. She *understood* them.

Rose had failed to find common ground with her girls—much the way the pedigreed debutantes at school chose to remain distant from the daughter of a Scots tradesman.

She could imagine how Gladys might view her, as one of those pretentious types with her education and boarding school English. Yet Rose was probably more like her charge than both of them realized. *"You are a Scots after all, despite your fancy speech and all that proper Sassenach schooling . . ."*

Fresh grief washed over her, and Rose blinked back tears. Tilly was right. In the past six years, she'd forgotten who she was and where her roots lay, hiding in the shadows until yesterday when she was empowered to stand up to Dobbs, not only for her girls but also for herself and every insult and injury they'd all suffered.

She placed the flowers in her locker and donned her smock and cap before going through inspection and out onto the factory floor. "Love thy neighbor as thyself," she murmured, recalling the Scripture verse Mum had taught her. Striding toward her section and the girls she supervised, Rose remembered one Easter at school when the pastor relayed the story of Christ washing the feet of His friends. He'd taught them a lesson in both humility *and* love.

Entering the Acids Room, she took heart as Jane, Sarah, and Dorothy

glanced up from their worktables and beamed. “Good morning, Miss Lockhart!” they chorused before Jane had a fit of coughing. As the girls returned to their tasks, Rose sensed Gladys’s dark eyes on her. She turned and smiled, patting the pockets of her smock to indicate she’d received her gift.

The girl’s eyes held relief and she returned the smile, pink rising against her yellowed cheeks. Rose bowed her head before she briskly departed to check on the others working at the vat tables.

A truce, then.



Alex left work a few minutes early that night, stopping first at the haberdasher's to pick up Maw's package, then at the post office to collect the telegram Mr. Wylie held for him.

"East Fortune, Alex," the aulder man said as he handed him the missive from behind the counter.

"Thanks." Heart thudding, Alex tore open the envelope as he walked outside.

Two birds bore no fruit. —Bonny Prince.

So the names he'd given to Stuart after Dexter's tour amounted to nothing. Alex fisted the telegram. He'd been inside the factory two weeks now, surveilling the men working in each area, and still the saboteur eluded him.

Last night he'd sent Stuart the name of Dobbs as a possible suspect, or at least involved in some kind of subversion. Alex learned from talking to others that the union steward was an instigator and liked to make trouble. No surprise, considering yesterday the man had threatened Miss Lockhart and frightened her workers.

Alex also sent the lieutenant the names of Dobbs's three friends, so Scotland Yard could do a thorough investigation on all of them.

Tucking the crumpled message into his jacket pocket, he struck out for home. He could only hope this time Dobbs or his cronies could lead him closer to finding Rhymer.

Until then, he'd continue surveillance of the union men. He'd noticed today they remained in their work area, steering clear of Miss Lockhart's team.

She had surprised him yesterday when he walked in on the confrontation in the Acids Room. Dobbs's foul blethering had been loud enough to be heard in Glasgow, but Miss Lockhart proved her mettle as she stood up to the man's hostility. A smile touched his lips. The soft, susceptible woman mending clothes from his maw's laundry

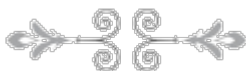
basket was a far cry from the fierce mother bear he'd seen protecting her cubs against a wild beastie.

His humor faded. What if Dobbs *was* involved with Rhymer in some way? The confrontation yesterday could have held a more sinister meaning. Had the union man thrown blame for the over-pressurized tank on the lassies to scare them off . . . or was he setting the stage for something bigger?

Alex wanted to believe the latter, yet he still had doubts. An experienced saboteur wouldna draw attention the way Dobbs did yesterday . . . unless he was just Rhymer's pawn.

Frowning, he rubbed the back of his neck. Just twelve days remained until the month of August. According to Kahverengi's scheme, Moorside would then become fair game for Rhymer's destruction.

Alex needed a miracle.



"'Tis good yer home, son, and not a moment to lose! Did the package arrive?"

Surprised when his maw met him on the front porch, Alex handed over the brown paper sack from the haberdasher. Then he lifted his nose, sniffing the air. "Is that haggis?"

"Aye." She opened the sack, inspecting its contents. "Yer sister's birthday request." She gazed up at him then, her eyes twinkling. "I seem to remember 'tis yer favorite too, so tonight ye'll both enjoy a Burns supper."

He bent to kiss her. "After being away for so long, I've missed your fine meals more than you know."

"Och, go on with ye." Yet as he leaned toward her, she reached to touch the side of his face. "I'm just so grateful to God that ye're here with us now to enjoy them."

The pressure against his chest eased. "Me too, Maw."

Her touch lingered another moment before she turned to go inside. "I must finish making our supper before your sister and Miss Lockhart return from practice," she called back. "Yer da's in bed having a wee kip, so I need ye to check on Fergus and James and help them to hang Hannah's birthday banner over the front door. They've been out back painting on it for the past thirty minutes, and well . . ." She turned to him again, laughter in her voice. "I'm sure 'tis the thought that counts."

He chuckled as he imagined the lads set loose with brushes and a can of paint. "Aye, and they've likely colored half the yard by now. I'll go and find them."

Moving through the parlor, Alex determined to clear his mind of his troubling thoughts, at least for tonight. It was Hannah's birthday after all, and he wanted it to be special for her. How often did a lass turn sixteen?

He found Fergus and James on the back porch, kneeling over their masterpiece. As he watched them put on the finishing touch, he angled his head to try to make sense of the smeared letters, Hapy birdday Hana.

"A fine job, laddies." He smiled as he gazed over their shoulders. "I'm sure our sister will be surprised."

"Alex!"

Both looked up at him then, and Alex stared in shock at the wide swaths of blue paint along the sides of their faces. "Och, what were you thinking to mark yourselves like that?"

"Me and James are warriors. Da says the auld Celts painted their faces blue before they went into battle." Fergus held up his small pot of paint. "See? Maw gave us blue, so we tried it." He squinted up at Alex. "What do ye think?"

Alex tried to look serious while he appraised his brother's efforts. Then he looked at James, whose wide grin showed off his two missing front teeth. "Well now, I'd be shaking in my boots if I came face-to-face with such fierce-looking laddies on the battlefield."

At their gleeful chortles, Alex dropped the boom. "But that's nothing compared to what Maw will do to you both when she finds out."

The two pairs of dark eyes widened, their blue faces puckering in alarm. Then they both glanced toward the dog, lying in the grass off the steps. Sensing their attention, the wee beastie rose to his feet, tail wagging as he turned to them.

"I canna believe . . ." Alex stared at Winston, the blue stripe vivid across one side of his snout. "You painted the dog for battle? What will you tell Miss Lockhart when she sees what you've done?"

"Da says Winston is Scottish, so I made him a Celt just like us." James held up his brush, still soggy with blue paint.

"Da said he's a Scottish *terrier*," Fergus corrected his brother.

Alex turned on his heel, his sides aching. "Bring your sign around to the front and let's get it hung." He barked the order, then went back inside through the house before he lost his battle with laughter.

It was terrible, aye, painting the dog like that. But considering his own mischief with Ian at their ages, he had to grin at his brothers' outrageousness.

He exited through the front and went to the shed to retrieve a few tacks and a hammer, and when he returned, the lads had carried the sign up the front steps. Each held an end of the sticky wet paper, blue faces looking as though they were about to face a firing squad.

Alex took an end of the sign and tacked it high over the door, then the other. When he finished, he eyed each brother sternly. "Go in now and show Maw what you've done. And dinna forget to tell her about Winston. I willna have your stunt ruining our sister's party tonight."

As he watched them drag their feet into the house, he allowed himself another grin. Best to stay clear of the coming blast.

Exchanging his hammer for the ax, he returned to the back to chop wood. The afternoon was warm, and he started peeling out of his shirt when he remembered Miss Lockhart's reaction the last time he did. He kept it on, leaving it unbuttoned and rolling up the sleeves. It occurred to him then that no one in his family made mention of the scars. Had she kept his secret?

He dropped the first blow with the ax while his thoughts circled around their mysterious boarder. All he really knew about her past were the high points—she'd been orphaned when she was about his sister's age and grew up in Glasgow.

Would Miss Lockhart be leaving at month's end? His already heated skin ignited, remembering their dance. The scent of lavender and her warm hand in his, the delicate outline of her softness as he'd pressed at her back, leading them through the steps.

Of course she should stay. His family had taken to having her here, and she'd been a bonny help to his maw and to Hannah.

She could even keep his room. God willing, he'd succeed in discovering Rhymer before next month and finish his mission. Once Weatherford had him reinstated to active duty in the RAF, Alex would leave Gretna.

And what of your family? Can you just walk out on them? He swung the ax hard at the next chunk of wood. After Ian's death, he'd started sending home half his pay, and he could do a bit more. But with Da unable to work, would it be enough?

At least while he was here his factory wages added to the family's income. And he could chop enough wood for the winter and perhaps re-shingle the auld roof. But what about once he returned to France?

Consumed with working out solutions for his family, he almost missed the sounds of female laughter approaching. He paused, inclining his head. Hannah's girlish humor he recognized, but the other . . .

He turned to see Miss Lockhart standing with his sister on the dirt drive still several yards from the cottage. Smiling, she wove a pretty green ribbon into Hannah's hair, and the sight filled him with warmth. Then his sister launched at her and they embraced, before Hannah laughed and pulled the pin from Miss Lockhart's straw hat and snatched both away.

Again the soft peals of laughter reached his ears, and his pulse quickened as he watched their dark-haired boarder. She was quite bonny when she wasn't trying to be so serious.

"Alex!"

The silence of the ax must have drawn his sister's attention. She hailed him just as Miss Lockhart turned.

Surprised when Hannah giggled and ran off, Alex swiveled his attention to Miss Lockhart. She remained staring at him, her pale face bright as Christmas. It was a moment before he understood and he grinned, dropping the ax to reach for the edges of his open shirt.

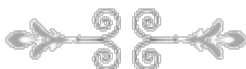


Rose saw his humor, and the heat in her face intensified before he finally covered his chest. What was she doing, gawking at him like that?

Then she thought of the puckered flesh that stretched across his upper back and shoulders. Even with the afternoon sun, he'd kept his shirt on. Perhaps he didn't want anyone else to see what she'd seen?

How *had* he received the injury? Clearly, the scars were burns. Had his plane crashed?

As if he'd caught her prying into his thoughts, he finished buttoning the shirt and looked up at her, all amusement gone. Then, sinking the ax deep into the stump, he headed toward the cottage.



“Open it!”

Kneeling at their sister's feet, Fergus and James bobbed up and down, eager for Hannah to tear away the paper wrapping and reveal the contents of her birthday package.

Mr. Baird looked on with amused curiosity from his favorite chair in the parlor while Mrs. Baird sat on the couch beside her daughter.

“What is it? A new football!” James poked a finger at the wrapping, his cheek still flecked with blue paint. As Rose watched from the cushioned chair beside Mr. Baird's, she smiled thinking back to the boys' forced confession at supper. Their “face painting” incident had included her poor dog! Winston must love the boys very much to have stood still for that. Hopefully a good scrubbing tomorrow would remove most of the blue from his snout.

Relaxing for the first time in days, Rose was glad to be a part of the family's birthday celebration. She'd been grateful for the fine meal, and even more relieved when Julien failed to make an appearance. Dare she hope he would never return to Gretna?

“Hurry!”

Fergus nudged his sister's knee, and Hannah eyed him sharply. “'Tis my birthday gift, Brother, so you'll wait until I'm ready.” She smiled, handing him the scissors. “I'll let you cut the string.”

Elated at the prospect, he quickly made the cut before Mrs. Baird snatched the sharp instrument from his possession.

When James thrust out his lower lip, Hannah let him unravel the brown paper, and once it was opened she gasped in delight. “A new costume!” Her eyes glowed as she looked at everyone in the parlor. “'Tis so modern and beautiful!”

She held up the rich green skirt and matching jacket, and Rose again admired Mrs. Baird's workmanship. With the arrival of the pearl buttons today, she had helped Hannah's mother with the finishing touches before supper and then wrapped the gift.

“There's no football?” James sifted through the wrapping for anything his sister might have missed. He sat back, clearly bemused. “Who wants a dress?”

“I do, silly.” Hannah grinned at him before reaching to hug her mother. “Thank you, Maw!”

“'Twas my pleasure, lamb. But I couldna have finished those pretty clothes in time if not for Miss Lockhart's help.”

“Oh, thank you, Miss Lockhart!” Setting aside her gift, Hannah clambered over her brothers and launched herself at Rose.

Beneath the young girl's smothering embrace, a floodgate of emotion opened in Rose and she hesitated only a second before raising her arms to encircle the slim young girl. "Your mother did most of the work," she said in a hoarse whisper. "I just helped a little."

Hannah leaned back, eyes shining. "Maw tells us that even a wee bit of help makes the grander things possible."

Rose could only manage to smile. Heavens, but she was growing to love this family more and more each day. Too much. How would she tell them good-bye next week?

Her gaze drifted to the captain, standing near the hearth. As he watched them, he didn't smile, but his rough features had softened and his tender look made Rose tingle all the way down to her toes. Had she been imagining his hostility earlier? Because at this moment, he hardly seemed suspicious or watchful. Instead, he clearly enjoyed the company, hers included.

"And now for some Cranachan." Mrs. Baird rose and headed toward the kitchen while Hannah returned to the couch to admire her new clothes. Rose went to assist her mother, looking forward to the delectable whipped cream and berry treat she hadn't sampled since childhood.

She helped to bring the servings out, and while Fergus and James were restricted to the dining room table, Hannah and the adults enjoyed their treats in the parlor—an allowance only on special days, Mrs. Baird informed her.

Rose breathed in the sweet smell of honeyed cream and raspberries as she held the bowl in her lap. "This looks delicious, Mrs. Baird, but after that wondrous meal tonight I am not certain I can eat another bite."

"I dinna doubt it, Miss Lockhart, after watching you tuck into the haggis."

The captain had made the remark and she tensed, until she caught the gleam in his eyes.

Was he jesting with her?

Buoyed by his change in mood, she lifted a brow and smiled. She could give as good as she got. "I dinna ken why you'd be surprised, Captain, when I'm a Scots lassie after all."

Laughter filled the room, and to Rose's ears it was a wonderful sound of home. At last the captain said, "I'm glad you can still talk like a Scots and not a Sassenach when it suits you."

Though he was teasing her again, the remark—especially after her

revelation earlier today—struck her heart. In six years' time, she had become a different person.

“So where did you learn to speak so properly, Miss Lockhart?”

At his curious gaze, Rose's humor faded. *More lies.* “I . . . was schooled at the orphanage, but I picked up my Sassenach as a paid companion to an English lady from Perth, before I ended up in Nottingham.”

“Nottingham?”

His green eyes pierced hers, and Rose gripped her spoon. It was the first time she'd told the Bairds exactly where in England she'd come from. “Yes, my . . . my mistress passed away in Nottingham a while ago, and I stayed on for a time, but I wanted to return to my homeland.”

“But not Glasgow?”

Rose pressed her lips against any more lies, stirring the whipped cream in her bowl until it began to liquefy. “I did return to Glasgow for a short while.” She shoved away the memory of the horrid clockmaker and added, “On the train north, however, I'd heard a few women mention HM Factory Gretna and the decent wages they offered. I decided to apply, and once I was hired, your sister kindly brought me home to meet your parents and here I am.”

“And glad we are.”

Mr. Baird beamed at her over the top of his dessert bowl, and again she warmed at the memory of the Baird couple's kindness to her when she first arrived. They'd made every effort not only to welcome her but to include her as part of their family.

Rose smiled at them both, sadness squeezing her heart. As she would soon be leaving, she must make her last memories with them unforgettable.

“So, dear brother, what did you get me for my birthday gift?”

At Hannah's mischievous smile, Rose turned her attention to the captain. He straightened from the mantel, still holding his bowl of dessert. “What's your fancy, lass?”

“Well . . .” The girl's gaze swept over her new clothes. “Maw and Miss Lockhart have gifted me with this lovely costume, and I'd dearly love to wear it out somewhere besides church.” She glanced at her parents. “And since I canna go anywhere by myself, I'd like you to take me to Edinburgh.”

“Edinburgh?”

“Aye! Please, Alex, you can take me tomorrow.” Hannah leaned

forward, her eyes lit with hope, the forgotten bowl still in her lap. "We have the day off and I can wear my new dress and . . . if I could invite Gladys Dunham to join us to see the sights, it would be braw!"

Hannah's gaze darted back to her parents, who frowned at their daughter. Mrs. Baird said, "I think after what happened with Miss Lockhart, the lass wouldna be suitable company."

Noting the girl's flagging enthusiasm, Rose asked gently, "Hannah, aside from football practices, have you and Gladys truly made amends?"

"Aye! She came to me this morning and apologized for getting me into trouble at Carlisle." Her eyes pleaded. "Can you forgive her as well, Miss Lockhart?"

Rose considered the live worms in her pockets, the sand in her lunch bucket, the oily boots, the powdered whistle, and discovering salt in her tea. Yet her lasting memory of Gladys Dunham would always be the two lovely posies of heather now hanging in her room. "Mrs. Baird, I believe Miss Dunham has had a change of heart. She's already given me proof of her regret for the foolish incident at Carlisle."

"So ye'd be willing to accompany them?"

"Oh no . . . this is Hannah's birthday outing." Tempting as it was to visit her childhood city, Rose doubted Gladys would want to spend her only day off with her supervisor.

Up until now, the captain had remained silent. He turned to his sister, his look apologetic. "I'm sorry to put a tear in your plan, lass, but I must go into the factory tomorrow after church, at least for a bit. Edinburgh is a full three hours by train. We'd arrive at the city in time to turn back around and come home again."

Again the light dimmed in his sister's mood, and Rose longed to help. "Are there any places closer to home you might consider for a birthday outing?"

The girl shook her head. "Edinburgh has the castle and so much history."

"All right." The captain set his bowl on the mantel. "If castles and history are what you want, lass, then be ready to leave here tomorrow at noon."

"But . . . where will we go, Alex?"

"I'll tell you tomorrow." He smiled and winked at her. "Just bring your maps and a picnic lunch."

"We're to have an adventure?" Again the clouds parted to reveal Hannah's radiance. "I canna wait!" She glanced at her mother. "And

Gladys? Can she come along?"

"If Miss Lockhart is willing to give her a second chance and agrees to go with ye, then aye, ye may include the lass."

The captain eyed Rose. "Would you care to accompany us?"

"Please, Miss Lockhart!" Hannah pinned her with a look of desperation. "Surely you must love history?"

Rose did enjoy history, and the idea of spending a Sunday out of doors with a picnic lunch held grand appeal. Besides, if she declined, then Gladys wouldn't have her chance at redemption, and it *was* Hannah's special outing after all.

She smiled at him. "I gladly accept your invitation, thank you."

"You are most welcome."

His warm gaze made her heart beat a little faster. He really was quite charming when he didn't scowl. "What should we wear?" Rose asked.

"Whatever you like." He turned to his parents. "Maw, Da, will you come with us?"

Mr. and Mrs. Baird exchanged a look before his father said, "You children go and enjoy yourselves. Your maw will appreciate a few hours of rest here at the house, and I'll oversee the lads outside, giving the wee dog a bath."

"I must go and find my maps!" Hannah vaulted from the couch, forgetting her bowl so that her mother made a quick grab for it. Undaunted, the girl scooped up her new clothes and headed toward her room. "I'll go and tell Gladys after church tomorrow," she called back. "We'll have such fun!"

Shaking his head, the captain grinned, and Rose's pulse leapt at the rare show of white teeth against his tanned skin. Surely it was just her relief; after all, he hadn't acted suspiciously toward her. He'd even teased her earlier and was quite pleasant all evening.

Her instincts told her he wasn't playacting either, a trait she reserved for Julien alone, who presented his best in public but then abandoned the charade once he was behind closed doors.

"A penny for your thoughts, Miss Lockhart."

Pulled from her musings, Rose realized they were alone. Mrs. Baird had collected the other dessert bowls and returned to the kitchen while Mr. Baird disappeared into the dining room, likely to check on his mischievous sons.

She looked toward the broad-shouldered man at the hearth. "I think that wherever you take us tomorrow, you have made your sister very happy on her birthday."

He offered a slow smile that made her senses tingle, and as she studied his face she saw no guile. Perhaps her secret *was* safe. She wanted to hope, anyway.

"I'll borrow a truck from the factory. We'll need it for where we're going."

Rose nodded, seeds of excitement beginning to sprout in her at their upcoming adventure. It was years since she'd last enjoyed a simple holiday, and this one would be spent in good company. She prayed the day would go well with Gladys too, giving them all plenty of sunshine, sight-seeing, and her an opportunity to learn more about Captain Alex Baird.

She stood and went to him, taking his empty bowl from the mantel to return it with hers to the kitchen.

"Will you be sitting out back again tonight?" he asked her.

"I will." Already she'd determined to make herself useful to Mrs. Baird with the mending before she left Gretna. "Will you be chopping wood?"

Instead of answering, he drew a deep breath, and Rose couldn't help but notice the way his chest expanded. She stood close enough that the familiar smells of leather and spice and a musk that was uniquely his filled her senses. "Aye," he said at last. "I must make sure they have enough fuel for the winter."

His words gave her pause. It was July, and while the split wood must certainly dry out before winter, he'd said "they" and not "we," as if he didn't intend to remain at the cottage.

Did the captain have his own secrets? She hoped for the opportunity during their outing tomorrow to learn more about him. Perhaps inquire about his scars, or the braver question, his relationship with Julien.

And reason enough, Rose Graham, to be on your guard lest he asks you the same question.

23



Brother, you've found us a truck!"

Alex had killed the engine and set the brake on the borrowed Leyland when his sister rushed out the front door of the cottage. This morning at church she'd worn her new green frock and still looked as bonny as Miss Lockhart did in her pink as she followed along, carrying the large wicker picnic basket.

He'd gone into the factory earlier to check the employee roster. With Rhymer as yet unknown, Alex wanted to see who was scheduled for the Sunday shift. In truth, he would have preferred to remain at the facility all day, but it was his scheduled day off, and unless he could justify his sudden presence, he ran the risk of raising suspicion. "*Everything by the book*," Weatherford had said.

Hannah's birthday outing had given him the idea to seek out Mr. Timbrell and request the use of the truck. Then tonight when he returned it, he could review the security log to see who had come and gone during the day.

"Where is your friend, lass?" Alex approached the pair and relieved Miss Lockhart of the large basket. He stowed their lunch into the back of the Leyland's open bed. "Is she not coming?"

"Aye, Gladys will meet us at Gretna's train platform."

"We can all squeeze into the front for now, but you and your friend must sit in back once we get on the road."

Nodding eagerly, his sister rushed with her maps to the Leyland and climbed into the truck's cab. Miss Lockhart didn't move. "Tell me, Captain. Where exactly *are* we going?"

He noted her uncertainty in the tiny creases at her forehead. Would she change her mind if his answer didn't suit her? "I thought you liked surprises, Miss Lockhart."

"Not particularly."

"Well, you needna fash, I thought we'd tour a few countryside

castles.”

Her relief was almost comical. Did she suspect he'd take them mountain climbing?

“I just wanted to be certain I had dressed properly.”

He grinned as she followed his sister into the cab.

Once he'd gone inside to inform his parents, Alex returned and gave the engine a hearty crank before climbing behind the wheel. “Find Lochmaben on the map, Hannah.”

“Truly? The castle?” She squeaked her excitement and quickly unraveled the first map. “See, Miss Lockhart? Lochmaben is right here!”

She traced her finger to a point twenty miles northwest of Gretna. “About a half-hour drive,” he said.

Her shining eyes met his. “Is that where we'll spend the day?”

“'Tis but a start, lass.” He smiled. “If time permits, we'll visit Caerlaverock as well.”

“Alex, you're the best brother!”

She turned in the seat to embrace him, and he chuckled, heat tinging his face as he leaned to drop a kiss against the top of her hat. Sweet heaven, how he'd missed this. If Ian were here, it would truly be fine . . .

His mood wavered as he gently set Hannah back against the seat. Alex looked up then and caught Miss Lockhart's gaze, and her eyes held such sadness and longing it made his chest hurt. He'd forgotten she had no family and he tried to muster a smile for her, but she quickly turned her attention to the open window.

With a sigh, he reached to adjust the throttle. Releasing the brake, the Leyland began moving down the long dirt drive. “Let's collect your friend before the day leaves us.”

They soon arrived at the platform, and while his sister and her friend climbed into the back of the truck, a very quiet Miss Lockhart remained with Alex in the closed cab.

He'd removed his coat and rolled up his sleeves, but as he drove, the sun continued to roast his exposed skin through the open window. He leaned to peer up at the sky through the windscreen, noting the clear blue color. Then he glanced toward Miss Lockhart as she was blotting her brow with a handkerchief.

She turned to him, and he realized her eyes were the same hue as the sky. “Is July always this hot in the north, Captain?”

Her ivory skin had become a mottled shade of pink, and he began to

doubt his judgment in choosing their particular outing. "Our weather's usually dreich. Overcast skies, rain, and the air is brisk even in July. But we've been gifted with a true summer day, so you're welcome to remove your jacket if you wish."

When she appeared to waver, he craned to glance back through the cab's rear glass window at his sister and her friend, now jacketless. "Guess the lassies had the same idea."

As he turned, Miss Lockhart gave him a shy smile and removed her coat, carefully folding the cloth onto her lap. "Was it warm in Nottingham before you left?" he asked her.

"Yes, it was extremely hot, even more so than today."

"How did you manage once your mistress passed away?"

She seemed to hesitate as she wet her lips, and he imagined their softness. "I found work in a factory for a time, but all the while I was homesick for Scotland."

Alex nodded. She'd said the same last night. He knew he should probably let things lie, but the memory of her longing and sadness prodded him. "You were still fairly young when your parents died, and with your brother already gone, you had no one else?"

"No one." Her skin turned a bright shade, and she reached to fuss with the purple brooch at her collar. "As I told your family, being alone has not been so difficult."

He didn't believe her. Miss Lockhart's slender back had gone ramrod-straight, and he'd witnessed the yearning she tried to hide. He sought a different angle to draw her out. "What did your father do for work?"

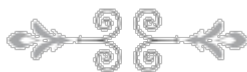
She was quiet a long moment, staring at the jacket in her lap. "My dad was in trade. A weaver," she said finally, looking up at him. "He and my mum had a shop—haberdashers, selling lace, ribbons, buttons, scissors, that sort of thing. My mum made dresses to order in the back. They worked the shop together, and we lived in the rooms above."

Alex listened, glancing between her and the road, and saw her expression soften, her eyes wistful and dreamy as though she'd forgotten he was there.

He forced his attention back to driving. "You had a happy childhood, then."

"Yes, while it lasted." She tipped her head toward him. "Would you . . . tell me about the scars, Captain?"

Alex gripped the wheel. He'd wondered when she would ask. "Burns. I received them after my brother's plane went down."



Seeing him tense, Rose leaned forward and waited, but he said no more.

Likely the enemy had shot down Ian's plane. But how was the captain burned in the process? Had they been flying together?

Seconds passed before she sighed and sat back against the seat. She shouldn't have asked him; in fact, last night she'd weighed the decision and decided it was none of her affair.

But just now he'd probed *her* emotions with questions about her mum and dad. Memories still raw and painful, especially after the last six unhappy years. So she'd turned the tables on him and tossed out the first safe question that came to her mind.

Leave him be, Rose. Clearly he didn't wish to speak of his scars, so she shouldn't press him. Not when she kept so many secrets of her own.

"Ian's plane went down over northern France about a year ago."

Rose jerked her head toward him. "Hannah told me he died over there. I'm very sorry."

"Not as sorry as I am, lass."

A lump rose in her throat at the agony in his expression.

"I had to be quick in pulling him from the burning wreckage to get him to safety. There was an enemy squadron of planes approaching." He spoke in clipped tones as he shifted his attention to the road. "I tore off my jacket, used it to reach for him. I was out of time, so I hauled his body over my shoulder. His clothes were still burning."

She drew in a sharp breath. *His brother . . . Dear Lord, he'd been on fire!*

He glanced at her then with the same look she'd seen the afternoon he bared his back to her while chopping wood. Grief haunted his face, and she ached for him. "I . . . please, accept my sincerest condolences, Captain. I . . . I cannot imagine how it must pain you and your family."

He nodded, his knuckles white against the steering wheel. "I've not told them what I just told you. I'd like to keep it that way."

"Of course!" Impulsively she reached for him, but then the heat of his skin met her palm and she quickly pulled back. "I promise, I shall say nothing. It is your secret to keep or share as you wish."

Again he offered a brusque nod while keeping his eyes on the road. Rose turned to her open window, the rush of warm air assuaging her sorrow and cleansing her of the awful memories of her own friend's

death.

Already they'd driven north several miles beyond Gretna into hillier, forested country and passing small villages with odd names like Kirtlebridge, Ecclefechan, and now a sign for Castlemilk. She glanced at him. "Why the name Castlemilk? Is there a castle?"

"Aye, a small one that sits beside the river known as Water of Milk." He turned to point out her window toward the west. "'Tis now used as a hospital for our wounded returning home. If you look closely, you can see the estate between the trees."

Gripping her hat against the wind, Rose leaned her head out of the window. "I see it!" When her glimpse of the distant gray stone turret vanished, she turned to him. "Is Lochmaben Castle equally grand?"

Her question seemed to amuse him. "Castlemilk is nothing more than a large manse built about fifty years ago. Lochmaben, on the other hand, is a castle proper. 'Tis centuries auld and filled with history, though now only remnants remain."

She continued to gaze at the sweeping expanse of gentle hills beyond the mansion, appreciating the patchwork golds and greens of farms hemmed in by thick copses of oak, birch, and ash. Rose couldn't recall when she'd been so at ease, with no Luther or Uncle Ridley watching her every move. A smile touched her lips as the wind caught her hair. Despite her reservations about the captain's acquaintance with Julien, she reveled in this newfound freedom.

She looked back at him. "How much farther?"

"About twenty minutes. I hope you find Lochmaben up to your standards, Miss Lockhart."

Rose caught his smile. He was teasing her again. She grinned, grateful he no longer brooded over the past. "I am certain that I will. Your sister was right. I do love history, and your castle tour today was a fine idea."

"Glad you think so. Edinburgh was too far to travel in an afternoon." He kept his focus on the road. "I once lived there as a lad, when my real maw was alive."

"Did you? I too lived . . ." Rose bit her tongue before she could say more.

She was too late. He gave her a sharp look. "You lived in Edinburgh?"

Fool! She looked down at her lap. "What I meant to say is that I have *stayed* in Edinburgh for extended periods of time." She swallowed past the lie to tell another. "With my former mistress."

“Ah, I see. And did you find Auld Reekie to your liking?”

She drew a deep breath to steady her pulse. “The city is quite busy, though I found it interesting with all there was to see. Especially Princes Street with its shops and markets.”

“Busier than Glasgow, then?”

Rose pursed her lips. It would be the one and *only* time she ever appreciated her visit to the clockmaker. “I’d say they are both quite grand.”

He glanced at her and grunted before turning back to the road. “There’s the town of Lockerbie.” He pointed ahead. “Lochmaben and the castle are only a few miles to the west.”

She was relieved to end their conversation when ten minutes later they entered the small, quaint town of Lochmaben. Passing by a neo-Gothic church that served the local parish, the captain slowed the lorry when they reached a cobbled square, the town hall made of lovely red stonework. Rose also noted a public house and various small shops with flats above.

At the heart of the square stood the statue of a medieval king.

He’d followed her gaze. “Robert the Bruce.”

“The king of Scotland was here?”

“Aye, at one time all of this area belonged to his family. See the mound up there?” He pointed west toward an abrupt rise in the land. “The original site of the Bruce castle before the English took it.”

He circled the lorry around the statue, and they again left the town of Lochmaben, this time following a road south alongside a rather large body of water. “That’s Castle Loch, and the site we’ll visit is at the far end.”

Before long they took another turn down a graveled road shrouded by trees of pine and birch and, moments later, emerged into a clearing. Rose glimpsed the stone ruins of a fortress surrounded by more trees with wild grasses growing in and around the site.

Ivy had overtaken much of what remained of the taller crumbling walls. “It looks more like a stone skeleton than a castle.”

“True, but there’s plenty of history.” The captain parked the lorry and killed the engine. “And I’m sure my sister will be eager to give us a lesson over lunch down by the loch. Then we can stretch our legs and do a bit of exploring.”

Before they could exit the cab, however, Hannah and Gladys bounded from the back to run toward the castle.

“Maybe we’ll eat after.” He shot her a grin and then climbed out of

the cab to shrug into his jacket. Rose remained in her seat and did the same, watching him from the corner of her eye.

She'd noticed earlier how fine he looked dressed in his Sunday best; the white linen shirt fitted snugly across his shoulders, and the brown waistcoat with gold buttons complemented his lean frame. He'd left off with a tie and removed his collar, doubtless due to the heat, and she observed the way the white linen contrasted sharply against his bronzed skin. Certainly he must have spent much time in the sun over in France.

He glanced at her then, a knowing smile on his lips, and quickly she averted her attention. Soon he came around the lorry and opened her door, and after helping her to alight, he offered his arm. "Shall we, Miss Lockhart?"

She stared up at his face, then at his proffered arm.

"No need to fear me, lass. I've been known to be a gentleman on occasion."

Goaded by his amused badgering, she tucked her hand into the crook of his arm, letting him lead her along the grassy trail toward Lochmaben's stone ruins. She could feel the muscles in his arm flex as they walked. "Did this castle also once belong to Robert the Bruce, Captain?"

"You can call me Alex, if you like. By now I'd say you've become well acquainted with my family, and we do live under the same roof."

She gazed at him. Was this the same man who once thought her naïve? The same man who claimed a friendship with the monster she'd almost married?

He's also the man who danced the waltz with you. And he let you win at football. "Alex." She smiled, her cheeks warm. "So was Lochmaben once home to Scotland's king?"

He glanced toward the castle's crumbling walls, where the two girls already tromped about in the grass. "Hannah's the one you should ask. She's read much about the castle's history, the dates, births, deaths, and battles fought here. She told me she intends to become a teacher after the war. Or was it a librarian?" He shrugged. "I canna remember."

He looked down at her, and his boyish grin made her heart do a flip. "I imagine your sister might like to draw maps. She would make a fine cartographer, don't you think?"

"Aye. From the time she was a wee lass, she loved tracing maps of different countries from the books at the library. Maw told me that during the past year, Hannah's been especially impatient to see new

places outside of Gretna.”

“Indeed.” Rose smiled. “Your sister said as much during our first meeting. She is young still but wishes to be grown up. I think in part it has to do with her work at the munitions factory and her association with older girls.” She weighed her next words. “Your sister is still learning good judgment in that regard.”

His features sobered. “Especially those lassies who like to torment her chaperone?”

Rose nodded and sighed. “The ipecac, of course.”

“And more, aye?”

She raised her head sharply, meeting his gaze. Did he know of her troubles at work?

His expression softened. “My sister may have mentioned a few of the . . . surprises you’ve had to deal with at the factory.”

“Hannah? She knew?” Disappointment pierced her. Had the girl been involved with the others in their cruel pranks?

“Tis not what you think.” He halted them on the path. “She confessed to me just this morning before church. She swears she didn’t take part, and I believe her. But she overheard conversations between those who did, including the lass who’s here with her today.” He paused. “Hannah’s been afraid to speak, but I told her she must tell you.”

Rose turned away and nodded. “Thank you. I’m relieved to know she wouldn’t stoop to such tricks.”

“Yet you never said anything.”

Why would she tell anyone her shame? It was bad enough Hannah’s admission had revealed to him her weakness as a supervisor. She raised her chin. “It was a matter I needed to handle myself.”

Humor lit his gaze. “Aye, I’ve seen how you handle yourself, Miss Lockhart.”

She started to pull away, but he gripped her hand against his body. “Dobbs?”

Rose stopped fighting and relaxed. He hadn’t been mocking her.

“I’ll admit, I was impressed with the way you stood up to him.”

A shaky laugh escaped her. “You have no idea how frightened I was. The man is a troll.”

His smile faded. “He willna harm you. You have my word.”

Rose saw the way his nostrils flared slightly, the green eyes now dark as the lake. Oddly his fierce look gave her comfort, but it was more than that. “I appreciate your promise, Alex, though I doubt Mr. Dobbs

will be bothering us again. And I believe my situation at work is much changed for the better.”

She glanced toward Gladys and Hannah, both laughing as they struck silly poses beside the castle’s remaining walls. “I think Miss Dunham will become a good friend to your sister.”

“I find that hard to believe, when she and the other lass nearly poisoned you and then landed with my sister in jail.”

“You may have your opinion, of course. But Gladys has redeemed herself in my eyes.” Rose angled her gaze up at him. “Believe me, it makes a world of difference when you know someone cares.”

“Alex, Miss Lockhart, hurry up! We want a picture!”

Hannah and Gladys stood together beside one castle wall, each pretending to hold a shield and wield a sword and giggling at each other.

The birthday girl looked lovely in her green ensemble, and Rose was pleased to see Gladys wore a simple yet attractive beige skirt with white shirtwaist and tan jacket. The small straw hat perched atop her dark hair held sprigs of the same purple heather she’d gifted to Rose yesterday.

“Alex, did you bring your Kodak camera?”

This time Rose halted. “Camera?”

Reaching beneath his jacket, he retrieved a small camera from his waistcoat pocket. “I picked this up while I was in France.”

“Miss Lockhart, come and join us!”

“Oh, no.” Once again she started to pull away from Alex. “You girls should have your own picture so you can show your friends.”

Alex turned to her. “What harm could it do?”

“Quite a lot.” She searched her mind for an excuse. “My . . . being in the picture with the girls would be construed as favoring them over the others.”

Rose hoped her reason would satisfy him. She flinched to imagine her photograph being passed about and possibly discovered by Julien, or Luther, or her uncle.

“I can take a few snapshots of the lassies, and then one with all of you that you can keep for yourself, if you like.”

Did he want to take a picture of her to share with her fiancé? “No, thank you.” She freed her hand from his grasp and stepped back. “I would be most happy to take a picture of *you* with the girls, however.”

“So you’re shy of the camera, then?”

“Absolutely.”

His lips broadened in a quick smile before he walked over to the girls and began taking pictures. Rose exhaled, grateful he hadn't pressed her. She'd keep a sharp eye on his camera for the rest of their outing, as she could ill afford to have his lens catch her in any unexpected shots.

When they finished their photographs, she joined them on the other side of the wall and surveyed the brick and rock-hewn carcass of what was once a sizable fortress. A marshy slough ran inside along its width, cutting through parallel stone arches. "Hannah, will you tell us about the castle? Your brother says you've studied its history quite extensively."

"Lochmaben is one of my favorite castles." Hannah smiled, her face pink with pleasure. "And actually, this is the second. The first motte castle stood over beside the town."

She pointed across the lake, and Rose nodded. "Alex showed me the rise of land on our way here."

"Aye, well the de Brus family built that fortress in the twelfth century. They received all of this land from Scotland's King David when he appointed them Lords of Annandale. But a century later, during the first battle for Scottish independence, King Edward the first of England defeated the castle and had this one built to house his army."

Hannah took a seat on a boulder of standing rock. "Over the years and lots of battles, the castle changed hands back and forth, but in 1306, Robert the Bruce declared himself King of Scotland and retook this castle from the English and held it for several years."

"Must 'ave been dangerous, livin' back then," Gladys remarked as she took a seat on the edge of an eroding section of wall.

"Aye, but how exciting to live when the Bruce and William Wallace both fought for Scotland's freedom." Hannah's face glowed, clearly impassioned about her subject. "Just think—this castle has been held and destroyed and rebuilt by both English and Scottish kings, and in 1565, Mary, Queen of Scots, and her husband, Lord Darnley, attended a banquet here while her troops chased down rebels who supported her half brother, James Stuart!"

She surveyed the ruins. "After more years of war and a very bloody religious battle, our King James the sixth became James the first of England, Ireland, and Scotland, and this garrison castle was no longer necessary. Lochmaben was abandoned, and now much is gone." She turned to Rose. "So that's what I know, Miss Lockhart. If only these

walls could speak.”

“Thank you, Hannah.” Rose smiled. “And I am certain the walls would tell us many stories about kings and queens and battles . . . and too much death.”

She turned to Alex, who leaned with arms crossed against one of the taller walls. “Why is it that men have such a penchant for fighting?”

“And why did I ken you’d ask me that?” He grinned at her and shrugged. “I suppose our nature demands it. Men do fight to defend themselves, but also for power and territory. We fight to settle grievances between us or to establish boundaries. Some men also enjoy fighting for the sport.”

“Some sport!” Hannah snorted.

“Aye.” Gladys bobbed her head. “In London, I’ve seen enough clobberin’ in the streets and behind closed doors to know they like it.”

“I was speaking more about boxing,” Alex said. “The pugilist fights in the ring for money and glory, not because he’s angry. And in America, they use boxing techniques to train their men for war.”

Rose shook her head. “For sport or not, fisticuffs still makes no sense to me.”

“That’s because you’re a woman, and as a rule you are nurturers and not fighters. And I’ll readily admit, the world couldna survive a man’s hard edges without a lassie’s soft hand to smooth them out.”

She smiled. “That is quite poetic for a man of war.”

He chuckled. “Aye, I suppose it is.” He pushed off the wall and approached. “All this talk of fighting has given me an appetite.” He winked at the girls. “Shall we go and have a bite to eat down by the loch?”

“Aye!” Hannah and Gladys shouted, and Rose watched them race toward the lorry for the picnic basket.

“How about you, Miss Lockhart?” His eyes gleamed. “Has our bloodthirsty history of kings and queens made you hungry?”

Rose laughed, and he chuckled as he again offered his arm. Tucking her hand against him, she said, “’Tis made me positively famished, Sir Knight. Lead on.”

24



Thanks for lettin' me come along today, Miss Lockhart. I'm 'avin' a grand time."

Gladys spoke in a hushed tone beside Rose as the two sat at the lake's edge, watching a pair of swans glide through the water while dragonflies danced above its dark-green surface.

Alex and Hannah sat across from them as they all shared the plaid blanket laden with Mrs. Baird's delicious oatcakes, raspberry jam, carrots, boiled eggs, and Dunlap cheese.

"I'm pleased that you joined us, Gladys." She leaned toward the girl and smiled. "The purple heather you gave me was lovely, and a very nice gesture. Thank you."

Gladys dropped her gaze. "I owed it, ma'am. With all o' the trouble I made for ye."

"Let's not speak of the past." Rose reached to lift Gladys's chin. "Everyone deserves a second chance to become the person God meant them to be." She pressed a hand to her heart. "In here."

Gladys offered a crooked-tooth smile, her dark eyes aglow. "Never 'ad anyone take up for me like ye did with Mr. Dobbs. Ye weren't afraid of 'im atall!"

Rose laughed, drawing the attention of the others. "That seems to be the consensus, but in truth my dislike of bullies outweighed my fear."

"You mean Mr. Dobbs?" Hannah had paused with a wedge of cheese to her lips. "Miss Lockhart, you were brave defending us against that awful man on Friday." She gave Gladys a smile. "It reminded me of David and Goliath."

"Who are they?" Gladys reached for a hard-boiled egg.

"From the Bible! You've not read it?"

When Gladys shook her head, Hannah set down her cheese. "'Tis the story of how a wee lad named David killed a giant named Goliath, hitting him between the eyes with a stone from his sling." Her amber

eyes sparkled. "But instead of a stone, our wee Miss Lockhart hit big auld Mr. Dobbs in the head with a piece of her mind!"

"If only it 'ad stuck!" Gladys crowed, and the two girls doubled over in a fit of giggles.

Rose looked from one to the other, then glanced helplessly at Alex. He only grinned and shook his head.

The girls were still merry when they climbed back into the open bed of the lorry an hour later, and once Alex had checked Hannah's map for directions to the next castle, he drove them south toward the town of Dumfries.

"I'm so glad Hannah is enjoying her day," Rose said after a few minutes, thinking of the two girls laughing over their own jest.

"Aye, she's had to go to work at a young age, and you ken the hours are long at the factory." He added gruffly, "She deserves to be just a lass for a day, without cares or responsibilities."

"Mm." Rose nodded. "And she is very fortunate to have you as her brother."

"You think so?" His eyes crinkled at the edges with humor.

"I do." Her heart thrummed to see his soft smile. What was happening? She should be on her guard with him yet found herself drawn, not only by his obvious physical appeal but more importantly by his love and care for his family. She didn't doubt he would sacrifice all to help them through their troubles; he'd proven that when he almost died to save his brother.

She continued gazing at his profile. It was because of that love he hid his scars and the burden of truth about the horrible way Ian Baird had perished. Like Rose, concealing the heartache of losing someone so dear to her.

"You've grown quiet, Miss Lockhart."

She cleared her throat. "Just woolgathering." She glanced ahead as they seemed to be approaching another village. "Is Caerlaverock Castle on this road?"

"Aye, but we'll stop in Dumfries first to get petrol. The castle's to the south, and once we've finished we'll drive back along the Solway Coast into Gretna."

"Is Caerlaverock also situated beside a lake?"

"Just a wee body of water and marshland. Hopefully the footbridge is still in place, otherwise we'll need a boat to row across." He glanced at her. "Have you ever been afloat, Miss Lockhart?"

Rose nodded. "Dad had a friend who sometimes loaned him the use

of his boat, and he and I would go fish one of the small lakes.” Smiling at the memory, she recalled the worms in her smock pockets. “I was not squeamish about baiting the hook, and it was a wonderful way to spend time with him.”

“You loved him much, then.”

His deep voice had gentled, and her heart swelled with emotion.

“Yes.” She turned to him. “Aye. Very much.”

“When I was a wee lad, Da would sometimes hop the train over to Leith and tell me later that he’d gone out with the men of Newhaven to help bring in the catch. He’d take away some fine cod and haddock for his trouble. Here in Gretna we’ve angled for trout and salmon off the waters of Border Esk, but one time he took us out on the Solway and we brought back sea bass and one pollock that Da fought like the devil to get into the boat.”

Rose saw how his features softened as he reminisced. “Your father is a good man, Alex. In fact, he reminds me much of my own.” She clung to the memory of Mr. Baird’s fatherly gaze and his kindness toward her when she’d told him about life with her mum and dad.

“Da’s always been a hard worker,” Alex said, turning his eyes toward the road. “For the past thirty years he’s been in charge of rail and equipment maintenance for the Caledonian Railway. When the big Quintinshill crash happened three years ago just north of Gretna, he and his crew worked night and day to repair the damage. I know it must grieve him now, being unable to work. Though he does a fine job helping Fergus and James after school with their lessons.”

Rose wondered if Alex mourned his own medical discharge from the RAF. He was an officer and had doubtless seen much action overseas. Was he satisfied working in the munitions factory? “Your father is wise, and I’m sure your mother appreciates his help with your brothers.” She smiled recalling the peas in James’s nose during her first dinner at the Baird home. “Those boys certainly do stay busy.”

Alex chuckled, and she was glad to be able to lighten his spirits. “Aye, especially when it comes to their imagination with paint.”

He turned and flashed a wink at her, and Rose’s pulse gave a start. Absently her fingers went to the thistle brooch at her collar. “I wonder if Winston’s bath proved successful.”

“If not, he’ll be branded a Celt for life.”

She laughed and dropped her hand to her lap. Wouldn’t dear Tilly be proud of that? “If he is to be a Celt, then we must get him his own plaid.”

She and Alex shared another amused look before Rose ventured to ask more about his family. "Hannah told me Mrs. Baird is your stepmother. When did you first meet her?"

"I was nearly five when my own maw died. Da met Mairi Hamilton a few weeks later when he interviewed for someone to care for me while he was at work. They married a year later, and we eventually moved here when Da transferred to the station at Gretna." He glanced at her. "Mairi's a good woman, and I know she loves me like her own."

"She dotes on you."

Her remark seemed to please him. "Aye. She is my maw in all the ways that count."

"She spoke to me about you and Ian with much love." Realizing too late she'd brought up the tender subject of his brother again, Rose still plunged ahead. "You two were once 'thick as thieves' as she put it, and always full of mischief."

He was silent for a long moment, his posture stiff while his hands clenched the steering wheel. Regret filled her. Why had she pressed him with more unhappy memories? It seemed any mention of Ian Baird pained him.

His next remark surprised her. "Ian was . . . a bit wild, but he had a good heart and a fine sense of humor. He loved teasing Hannah when she was a bairn, but he always made up with her, giving her a piece of sugared fruit or a ride on his bicycle."

Rose eased back in the seat. "And the story about the mischief?"

He laughed, a low rumble from deep in his chest that made her shiver with pleasure. "'Twas more like Ian getting us *into* trouble and me trying to get us *out*." He turned to her, his eyes gleaming. "We were six years apart and so it was my responsibility . . ."

His voice trailed off, along with the light in his eyes as he turned toward the road. "I was to take care of him, always. I failed in that as well."

Again, Rose ached for his loss. "I am sure you did your best."

"How could you possibly know that, Miss Lockhart?"

She flinched at his tone yet held her ground. "I've seen the way you care about your family, Alex. Even your scars are a testament to the love you hold for them. You tried to rescue your brother, but daily this war kills so many young men—"

"The war didna kill him." He bit out the words. "I'm the one who pressed him too hard, too far."

Rose stared at him. What could she say? He was correct—she hadn't

witnessed the plane crash or what led to his brother's death. She had no right to make assumptions. Hadn't she accused him of the very same sin that morning after their first encounter?

Yet in her heart she couldn't believe he'd intentionally harmed his brother. Though guilt did terrible things to the mind, as she well knew.

She frowned as he raised a hand to rub at his forehead. "Have you had more trouble with your headaches since you arrived back in Gretna?"

He turned to her sharply, his look much like an angry bear. She hesitated. "You mentioned to your parents last week that you suffered headaches from the battle fatigue?"

"Aye, sometimes."

His shoulders relaxed, and he shifted his attention back to the road. Relieved to have soothed his mood once more, Rose wondered if she dared use the moment of calm to ask him about Julien.

How should she go about it without raising his suspicions? She folded her hands in her lap and said, "I imagine you enjoyed flying very much. I hope you'll get the opportunity to do so again. Does this battle fatigue eventually go away?"

"In most cases," he said. "The condition's called aeroneurosis, a common enough symptom of war pilots who spend too many hours in the cockpit. Many suffer headaches and nervousness as a result, but it can be cured with time and rest"—he turned to her—"though for some, like me, it can take longer to recover. 'Tis similar to shell shock in soldiers, if you've heard of it."

Rose vaguely recalled an article in the newspaper about the condition. "Do any of the other pilots in your squadron suffer from it?" She paused, deliberating her next words. "Does . . . Lieutenant Dexter have aeroneurosis?"

"Why the deuce would you ask me that?"

At his thunderous look, she pressed herself up against the truck door. *Oh, Lord, I've gone and done it!* Pulse racing, Rose combed her mind for an excuse. "Because . . . I understand that you know the lieutenant. Hannah mentioned that the two of you have flown together."

"Aye." Jaw working, he stared at the road. "Aeroneurosis has never been his problem." He flashed another heated look at her. "Does that satisfy your curiosity, Miss Lockhart?"

Far from it. Still, she nodded briskly. Were Alex and her fiancé less than friends after all?

Silence ensued as he continued to drive, though his muscled arms

and shoulders flexed while his knuckles whitened against the steering wheel. When he didn't look at her, Rose exhaled and turned back toward the open window. Strands of her hair beneath the hat blew wildly about as she stared at the pastoral scenery.

Unwanted thoughts of Julien resurfaced, like him standing beside Alex and the newspapermen while he worked his charm on Hannah and the other girls. And Rose had watched all from the safety of her hiding place. What if her return to the vats had been just a few minutes earlier?

A shiver ran through her as she reached to pull away a wisp of hair the wind had caught. The possibility didn't bear imagining.

Her gaze darted back toward the man seated beside her. Was he friend or foe? Their time together at Lochmaben Castle and a lovely picnic beside the lake hardly seemed the subterfuge of a man intending to turn her over to her fiancé.

There is more than yourself at stake if you are wrong. Rose squeezed her eyes closed, fear warring against her desire. If only she could be certain!

She hated pulling up her tender roots in Gretna. Leaving her job, even her girls now that Gladys had made amends. And especially leaving the Bairds, including Alex. But the only way to safeguard Duggie and Samuel was to remain dead to the world. Rose had called the school again on Thursday, still pretending to be her aunt, and was glad to learn the boys were still there.

They soon arrived in Dumfries, and Alex pulled up beside a petrol pump. Longing to ease her restlessness, Rose exited the cab and stretched her legs. Hannah and Gladys were quick to clamber out the back of the lorry and rush across the street to a department store, where they stood at its large plate-glass window and admired the items on display.

Alex had already started adding fuel for the rest of their journey. Rose studied his capable movements while her disquiet continued unabated. She wanted to trust that he and Julien were more rivals than friends—a situation she could believe knowing her fiancé's arrogance, his cruelty *and* his corruption.

What would happen if she simply asked Alex?

Do you really want to take that chance? She turned away and sighed. Let it be enough that she was leaving Gretna in a few days. Until then, she and Alex were enjoying a lovely afternoon, and she hoped the earlier friction between them was at an end.

Resigned to her decision, she looked across the street at the two girls. A smile touched her lips, observing their animated conversation as both pointed to something in the window.

She glanced toward Alex, and his tender expression as he watched his sister made Rose again doubt her suspicions.

Hannah looked up then, and her face filled with joy as she waved at him. Once more a deep hunger seized Rose as she witnessed their silent exchange. How she longed for her own little family!

“Are you ready to continue, Miss Lockhart?”

She turned to see Alex had completed his task and stood with his back against the lorry. “Or shall we see what trinket has those two girls jabbering like magpies?”

His smile lifted her spirits and she nodded her assent, strolling with him across the street to the store.

“D’ye think them comely, Miss Lockhart?”

Gladys pointed in the window, her dark eyes shining. “I once seen the like in a display window at Selfridges in London.”

Rose eyed the pair of stylish green gloves the girls had been ogling in the display. Then her gaze drifted to the other items offered in the store—woolen tams and ready-made dresses, an array of buttons, spools of silk thread, ribbons, and knitting needles. So many of the same wares her mum and dad once sold in their Edinburgh shop.

“Miss Lockhart?”

Swallowing, she turned to meet the pair of expectant faces. “The gloves are quite lovely. And the color matches your jacket and skirt perfectly, Hannah.”

Pleasure lit the girl’s face. “And to think, the very same gloves in Selfridges are being sold here in Dumfries!” She glanced at her brother. “What do you think, Alex? Would they not be perfect to wear to church in Gretna?”

Alex merely shrugged and continued perusing an array of hand-carved pipes and various brands of smoking tobacco in the window.

Hannah turned to Gladys, her bubble of pleasure deflated. “I should have expected my brother’s reaction when it comes to fashion . . . Oh, look, Gladys! Aren’t those lavender ribbons fine?” And like quicksilver, their attention was averted.

“If you lassies want to see the next castle, we’d better go.”

Alex made the announcement, and Hannah heaved a dramatic sigh, no doubt meant for her brother as she turned away from the window with Gladys and the two trudged back to the lorry.

He remained in front of the display. "Go on ahead to the truck, Miss Lockhart. I need to make a purchase and I'll be out in a minute."

"Of course." She too glanced toward the tobacco and pipes in the window. How thoughtful to buy a gift for his father! Mr. Baird enjoyed having a smoke on the back porch, and no doubt tobacco was a luxury in the Baird home.

She returned to explain his purchase for Hannah's father, then climbed into the cab. Alex soon arrived, having again shed his coat. He handed Rose the folded bundle, and once they were back on the road, he steered them south toward Caerlaverock Castle.

"I'm sure your father will enjoy his gift." She held the coat, noting the thickness of a package hidden within its folds.

"That would be a sight." He looked amused. "And I can assure you he willna be caught dead in those."

"But . . . I thought you purchased tobacco?"

"Aye, that too." He patted his waistcoat pocket. "Open the package, but take care the lassies dinna see you from the back."

Rose craned her head toward the rear window to see the girls safely occupied. She opened the folds of the coat, already guessing Alex had purchased the pretty green gloves for his sister. She cast another glance before peeling back the paper and running a finger over the soft leather. "Hannah will be delighted."

"My sister's hints are like a brick to the head when she wants something." His crooked grin made her pulse leap. "'Tis her birthday, though, and I've got several to make up for."

Of course, he'd been away during his years at war. Rose smiled and tucked the gift back into the folds of his coat.

"I imagined that shop in Dumfries was much like the one your parents had in Glasgow?"

Glasgow . . . Jerked from her pleasant moorings, Rose focused on trying to keep her story straight. "Yes, though our shop was not nearly the size of the department store. Still, we had many of the same items, including a few pairs of ladies' gloves like these." She patted his coat.

"Do you plan to open your own shop one day?"

She eyed him sharply. Surely it was a harmless question. "I have been thinking about it. It has been years since I assisted my mum with dressmaking and my dad with the accounts and purchases, but I believe I would be capable of running a shop, if I set my mind to it." She decided to give him equal treatment. "What about you? Do you have any plans beyond the munitions factory?"

“Flying.” His response was immediate, before he glanced at her, a slight coloring in his features. “That is, if I’m able to get back in the air.”

“How did you get started flying planes?”

He smiled. “I’ve always loved being around planes and the idea of flight. Before the war, I worked as a mechanic at the Larkhill Aerodrome in Wiltshire, and I met my best friend, Simon Forrester, who was a pilot-in-training.” Alex turned to her. “He had a gift for flight and soon moved up the ranks in the Royal Flying Corps. Once the war started, he and I shipped off to Dover, and he got his orders to fly to France. A few months later, I decided to begin pilot training myself, and before I was recently discharged, I was flight commander for our squadron at Saint-Omer in France.”

So his best friend was not Julien? Rose wet her lips. “Is your best friend . . . still flying?”

“Aye, he’s training RAF pilots now at Stonehenge. Though he’s stuck in an office job until his wife has the bairn in a couple of weeks.” He grinned. “He hates being grounded.”

Rose eased back against the seat. Thank goodness she hadn’t broached another awkward topic. “So, will you return to the RAF?”

“No. I’ve been doing some reading, and a few years ago the first British pilot transported mail by air between Hendon and Windsor. And during the past two years, the RAF has flown some supplies to our troops in the east. I believe long-distance mail delivery by plane will become a standard for the future.” He smiled at her. “And I want to be a part of that.”

“Will you remain in Scotland?”

“Aye, I want to be based near my family.” He paused. “Will you return to Glasgow?”

Rose hesitated, debating what to say. She had to maintain some secrecy, but she cringed with each lie she told, even to Alex. Especially to Alex. “Not Glasgow. I want to see more of the world first. Perhaps sail across the Atlantic and visit Canada.” She decided to hedge. “Or America.”

His brows lifted. “That would surely be more of the world.”

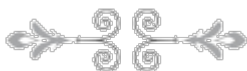
“I’ve seen brochures. The lands across the ocean look beautiful. The advertisements encourage people to come and make a new start. Fitting for after the war, don’t you think?”

“Aye.” He focused on the road ahead. “A new start can be a good thing.”

“Yes.” Rose stared at her lap as she imagined Duggie and Samuel’s faces. “A time to forgive . . . and to be forgiven.” Then recalling the preacher’s words, she added, “To let go of the past and look ahead to a new future.”

When Alex made no comment, she looked up. Had she managed to anger him again, reminding him of his own wounds?

He met her gaze then, and Rose took heart to see a new light dawn in his eyes. “I hope you’re right, Miss Lockhart.” He turned back toward the road. “I pray that you are right.”



The sun hung low against the horizon by the time Alex finally pulled up near Timber Town in Gretna to allow Hannah’s friend a short walk to the factory huts.

With the truck’s motor still running, he climbed from the cab and glanced back inside, a smile on his lips. Miss Lockhart slumped at an angle against the opposite door, sound asleep, her small straw hat askew as the side of her face pressed into the cushioned seat. *Och, that I would be able to sleep again like the angels.*

He headed to the back to see to the lassie’s departure, and once she and Hannah said their good-byes, his sister asked to stay in the back of the open truck. With the night air still balmy, he agreed.

“Thank you for a perfect day, Alex.” She leaned back against the cab’s rear window, her expression tired but happy. “Having you home is the best gift of all, but now I have these gloves.” She held up her hands encased in the soft green leather he’d gifted her once they reached Caerlaverock. “And I got to spend the entire day with my big brother and Gladys and Miss Lockhart.” She sighed her contentment. “’Tis a birthday I shall never forget.”

He tipped his head. “You’re not tired of castles, then?”

“After today, I want to see more!” She reached to prod him in the chest with a gloved finger. “And once this war is over, you’ll have time to take me.”

She grinned at him, and Alex managed a smile, the vise on his chest tightening. He’d soon be gone. After he completed his assignment, he would return to the war and his duty.

The plans he shared with Miss Lockhart earlier were just dreams. Only God knew if or when he’d ever come home again, and until then

he would be lost to his family. "Aye, lass," he said, his voice thick. "We'll go and visit them all."

Walking back to the truck's cab, he turned his mind from the future to the present. There was the mission to think about. Would he find Rhymer tomorrow?

He opened the cab door and paused. Miss Lockhart slept on, but she'd left her place at the opposite door to sprawl on her side, her head resting on the seat under the steering wheel.

Grinning, he reached in and gently nudged her back to an upright position, almost laughing when she failed to stir at all. Once he maneuvered his way behind the wheel, he tilted her head with its crooked hat back against the top of the seat. "Sleep well," he murmured.

Releasing the brake, he set out toward home. He still wanted to check the log sheets when he returned the truck to the factory later. Would he find anything? Someone in the factory outside their scheduled shift or in an unassigned area?

An unexpected weight landed against his shoulder; at the same time Miss Lockhart's straw hat smacked the side of his face. Reaching up, Alex pulled the decorative pin from the hat and tossed both across the seat so that only her dark head bobbed gently against him.

As she continued to sleep, he slowed the truck so he could study her. In such a tranquil state, she made a bonny sight. Her milky skin seemed as soft as lamb's wool, its smoothness broken only by her rosy lips, now relaxed and faintly parted. Tiny spots of pink revealed where the afternoon sun had kissed her cheeks and a slightly pointed chin.

With her eyes closed, he allowed himself to peruse the fine brows arched high above thick lashes, while the hair she'd worn pinned up all day unraveled at her temples.

Not so different from their very first meeting. Alex smiled recalling her attempt to brandish him with his nine-iron, her long braid of hair the color of rich earth coming completely undone. He remembered a few nights later when she'd waltzed with him in her bare feet, surrounding him in the scent of lavender, her soft hand in his . . .

"'Tis a wasted flight your thoughts have taken, lad," he muttered as he turned his full attention to the road ahead. Once he returned to France, his future was uncertain. And Miss Lockhart made it clear she planned to cross an ocean once the war was over.

The weight against him grew heavier as the sleeping woman turned into him. Then she reached to rest that same soft hand across his

shoulder.

His smile returned as he imagined her shock when she awakened to find herself in such a state. Yet he hesitated to nudge her away. Aye, she *was* soft and vulnerable, yet she'd shown her courage against a man like Dobbs. She was smart and determined and bonny and—

“No more.” Pushing out a sigh, he wheeled the truck onto the long dirt drive that led toward home. As he parked in front of the house and killed the engine, Alex found his angel still sound asleep. Gazing at her upturned face and the dark lashes fanned against her fine cheekbones, he was reluctant to wake her. He'd give himself just a wee bit longer—

“Maw! Da! We're home!”

His sister's noisy clambering from the truck managed to awaken Miss Lockhart. The lashes fluttered open, and for an infinite second her languid gaze met his, soft and warm and inviting. His heart thudded heavily as he watched her, pierced with a sudden need that the moment should go on forever.

But as she slowly raised her head, he kenned the spell was broken. Her fair complexion surged with color as she yanked her arm from his shoulder and straightened to sit rigid against the seat.

“Alex? Miss Lockhart? Aren't you coming in?”

Alex glanced out the window in time to see his sister approach. “Go on inside, Hannah. We'll be there in a moment.”

She spun around to head back to the front door. Alex turned to his sleeping angel. “Are you all right?” he asked gently.

She looked away. “I . . . yes, I . . . I need to find my hat and the pin.”

He reached around her, fetching them from the other side of the cab as she pressed herself against the seat. Handing her the hat and pin, she quickly began fixing her hair.

Exiting the truck, he went around to the other side to help her down. She clung to him after her feet had touched the ground, and he held her fast for another few seconds until she got her footing. Not once did she look at him, her face still a rosy hue.

“I need to return the truck to the factory tonight, so I'll be off and return in a couple of hours. Will you let my family know?”

Her eyes darted to the cottage entrance, and she nodded.

“All right then. I'll see you later.”

Once he let go of her, she strode to the front porch where she paused and turned, her head down so he couldn't see her face. “Thank you, Alex.”

Without waiting for his response, she opened the door. Alex watched

her, his pulse still racing as she raised her head and disappeared inside.



OFFICE OF THE ADMIRALTY
WHITEHALL, LONDON
MONDAY, JULY 22

Once again the game was on.

"They've found her." Elation shot through Marcus as he replaced the telephone receiver on its hook and turned to his friend.

"Found who?" Simon had taken up the leather wing-back chair across from him.

"Miss Tilda Lockhart." He waved toward the telephone. "That was the desk chief at MI5. Last month they installed a man at Moorside to pose as a clerk in the payroll office, hoping to flag any new hires with the name Thomas Brown or Rhymmer. However, this morning it was Miss Lockhart's name that surfaced on the payroll list."

Simon looked bemused. "And how is finding this Miss Lockhart significant?"

"This." Marcus reached into his file and retrieved the frayed paper tag from St. Ezekiel's orphanage in Glasgow. He handed it across the desk.

Simon took up the tag and read it. "What is this, Marcus?" He glanced up, his brow creased. "I canna make sense of your sudden revelation."

"That tag was discovered months ago in Kahverengi's abandoned flat."

"You mean when they found the list of targeted munition factories?"

"Righto." He nodded. "From the information you hold in your hand, we were able to track down Miss Lockhart at Aylesbury Prison. Detective Quinn of Scotland Yard's Special Branch accompanied me to Buckinghamshire to broker the deal."

The gray eyes across the desk narrowed on him as Simon tossed the

tag back onto the desk. "I assume that you'll tell me before the sun sets what all of this means?"

"Miss Tilda Lockhart is Rhymer's sister."

His friend straightened in the chair. "Why is she at Moorside . . . ?" He paused, frowning. "Rhymer's getting ready to make his move."

"Exactly."

"But . . . if you knew all of this when we met with Alex, why did you not tell us?"

"At the time, Miss Lockhart had disappeared without a trace. We believed that she fled the country after the Chilwell explosion."

"Marcus." Simon eased back in his seat, propping an ankle across his knee. "Back up just a wee bit with this story and explain."

Marcus relayed the details of his meeting at the prison with Miss Lockhart. "In exchange for a pardon, she agreed to let us place her at Chilwell. She was only required to find her brother and make a positive identification." He paused. "We needed to make an arrest and get Rhymer's testimony in order to catch his boss, Kahverengi."

Simon angled his head. "But . . ."

"Two days before the explosion, she received a small package from him. Her brother must have seen her at the factory or discovered her on the employee roster, and he decided to test her loyalty by recruiting her. The package contained explosives with instructions to get the bombs inside Chilwell and then meet with him."

"And did she do it?"

"Not directly," Marcus hedged. "Scotland Yard had a man acting as her contact, and they arranged to switch the real bombs for dummy charges. Two detectives were already inside the factory and instructed to follow Miss Lockhart to the meeting place where they would arrest Rhymer. But then suddenly the factory exploded, and she disappeared . . . until today."

"If she carried only dummy charges, then how did the factory explode?"

"We have no solid answer to that." He sighed. "And because the two detectives died in the blast, we cannot even confirm if she met with Rhymer. At the time, we surmised that either Rhymer did not trust his sister and planted the explosives himself or she'd tipped him off about Scotland Yard's plan, and he set the explosives while she made her escape. But now that she's resurfaced at the next munitions target—"

"Clearly, Miss Lockhart was his accomplice and she's connected with him to the arms dealer." Simon eyed him gravely. "That about sum it

up?”

Marcus hesitated. “There’s more.”

“More?” Simon frowned.

“MI5 reported a blunder in the payroll office with Miss Lockhart’s employment paperwork. She’s actually been working at the factory for over two weeks.”

Simon leaned forward in the chair. “Alex needs to know, Marcus. Now.”

“Trust me, he will before the day is out.”

“So Rhymer is there?”

“We haven’t confirmed it. Scotland Yard interviewed every employee at Moorside named Thomas Brown—a total of seventeen. All have been cleared as suspects.”

“Did you ever make a connection between Thomas Brown and Rhymer? You said both names were written on the target list.”

Marcus shook his head. “Miss Lockhart told us she once had a brother, Thomas, but she did not recognize the name Brown. We only made the connection between her brother and Rhymer when she mentioned some Scots legend from their childhood, a story about ‘Thomas the Rhymer.’ Seems her brother was quite taken with using the moniker.”

“I remember the tale. Thomas the Rhymer was a real bard from the Middle Ages who wrote about his visits to the fairies—”

“Enough, please.” Marcus held up his hand. “I’ve been briefed on the story.” He rose and came around the desk. “Honestly, Simon? If I think too long about these *scraps* of evidence we’ve collected, it seems an impossible task to catch this saboteur.” He scowled. “In fact, I suspect the name Thomas Brown on that list is fictional, and Kahverengi’s plan is to waste our time. He’s got Scotland Yard expending most of their resources, interviewing every man with a name so common there must be hundreds working inside our munitions industry. And while we waste manpower, *he* takes his time orchestrating the next explosion.”

“So, what will you do now? Have Miss Lockhart arrested?”

“Of course not.” He dismissed his friend’s surprised look. “We must wait until she makes contact with her brother. Once Rhymer is known to us, we can catch him in the act.” He began to pace. “It is maddening to know she has been at Moorside all this time without our knowledge. I can only hope we haven’t missed something already.”

“That means everyone living in Gretna is in danger.”

Marcus paused and turned to him. “We still have ten days, if

Kahverengi keeps to his August schedule. That is why I want you to tell Alex."

Simon rose from the chair. "Me?"

"Make it clear he is to locate her, but under *no circumstances* is he to confront her. Then report back to me, understood?"

"I'll send a telegram right away."

Marcus nodded. "Keep me apprised."

Once Simon left his office, Marcus resumed his pacing. He clung to one last hope—that if they didn't know until today Miss Lockhart was at Moorside, perhaps her brother didn't know yet either.

He returned to his desk and reached for the telephone. "Get me Quinn."

Marcus could only pray they were not too late.

26



GRETN

MONDAY, JULY 22

Time was running out.

Alex frowned as he stared at the clipboard and the names of his new suspects. He'd stayed late at the factory last night after returning the truck, checking log sheets and running them against last week's work roster to see if anyone not scheduled was inside the factory yesterday.

Three names had popped up, and Dobbs was one of them.

Two nights ago he'd sent in the union steward's name with his cronies. How long would it take Scotland Yard to investigate and get back to him?

As for the other names, two machinists in the boiler area, he'd spent the morning observing them and planned to send his inquiry to Stuart during lunch.

Tucking the clipboard under his arm, he headed toward Dobbs's work area. Alex intended to ask the union steward if he'd resolved the leaky tank issue after his skirmish with Miss Lockhart on Friday. Any excuse was good if it meant he could keep an eye on the man.

Passing through the nitroglycerine section, he paused to glimpse Miss Lockhart near the vat tables, speaking earnestly with one of her charges.

Warmth seeped into his chest. His sleeping angel in pink was back to being the factory lioness minding her cubs. Hopefully, after sharing their afternoon yesterday with Gladys Dunham, the pranks against her were at an end, too.

She looked up then and smiled, and his pulse picked up its pace. Giving her young lassie a pat on the shoulder, she walked in his direction.

"'Tis a good day?" he asked as she approached, relieved she'd finally

recovered from her embarrassment of last night.

"What do you think?" She wore a satisfied look. "I finally received my wages."

He raised a brow. "Now, that's cause for a celebration."

"I think so." She bounced up on her toes. "I can afford now to splurge on a cup of tea at the canteen."

He smiled. "I'm just happy to see you in better spirits, lass."

Her face turned pink. "I was not trying to avoid you, Alex."

"Aye, you were," he said, amused. This morning at breakfast was the first he'd seen of her since she awoke in his arms last night and went inside the house. And all the way into work, she barely gave him a glance.

"Well, I may have been just . . ."

"A wee bit self-conscious?"

She nodded and sighed. "A wee bit." Then her large blue eyes met his, and Alex thought he might drown in their depths. "I have not properly thanked you for yesterday. You know, for . . . for . . ."

He reached to brush his hand along the side of her face. "No need, lass," he said. Then he winked. "I enjoyed every minute."

She straightened, her fine forehead creased. "Are we speaking of the same thing?"

"I thought we were." He tipped his head, grinning. "What do you think?"

Her color brightened. "I think I must get on with my paperwork." Yet as she headed toward her office, she turned to him and smiled.

Alex followed her with his gaze, heart thrumming as he looked forward to the evening when they would converse at supper, and knowing she would be near while he chopped wood as she sat on the back porch with his maw's basket of mending.

It still surprised him how much he'd shared with her yesterday about Ian's death and the scars he'd received on his back. Except for Captain Weatherford last year, Alex had not spoken of the accident with anyone else, not even Simon. Yet Miss Lockhart was practically a stranger.

No, not a stranger. Again he envisioned her face as she'd first opened sleepy eyes to him, her smile soft and dreamy, just before she roused to full consciousness. An intimate revelation that had pierced his soul. And he found he could talk with her and he needna fash about her passing judgment, at least not as harshly as he judged himself.

What *had* her life been like? She'd been younger than his own sister when death took her maw and da and forced her into an orphanage. A

place that likely meant strict rules and not enough love to go around, especially to the aulder bairns.

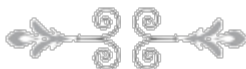
Yet she wasna hardened by the experience; he'd seen her kindness, the way she responded to his family, and they had come to love her. *And you, man, you're not a bit smitten too?*

Alex shook off his musings. The constant thought of her was becoming a habit he couldna risk while he was here. Just ten days remained until Rhymer initiated his plan to try to detonate Moorside. And if the madman succeeded, the shock waves alone from an explosion would wreak havoc on thousands living in the area.

He continued on toward Dobbs's work area when sounds of laughter caught his attention. Alex turned, gazing back at his sister, who was showing off her warrior "poses" of yesterday to the other lassies at the vats.

A smile touched his lips. Once he accomplished his mission, he'd ask to extend his stay for a couple of weeks. Weatherford still owed him furlough.

His heart thumped at the prospect. He would take his sister to see a few more castles. And, against his better judgment—he could spend more time getting to know Miss Lockhart.



She was still on his mind at lunch when Alex left the factory for Gretna's post office.

The bell over the door rang as he entered the establishment. "Mr. Wylie?"

"Captain, good to see you." The auld postmaster appeared from the back office. "Another telegram?"

"Aye."

Alex offered him the message for Stuart, but instead of taking it, Mr. Wylie turned to remove a yellow envelope from the maze of cubbyholes along the back wall. "Got one for you as well."

"Thanks." Alex took the telegram and straightened his stance. *London.*

While Mr. Wylie went to the back to send Stuart's message, Alex looked around the small office. Assured he was alone, he tore into the envelope. Quickly deciphering the code, his mouth went lax as he stared at Simon's words: *Locate new bird at Moorside. Tilda Lockhart.*

Discretion critical. Advise.

Blinking, he reread the statement, his pulse thudding like a death knell in his throat. An image of Ian flashed in his mind—the wounded dark eyes and scorched flesh. The papers he'd carried on his person along with *her* photograph, the final betrayal.

Alex swallowed hard, glancing up from the missive. “Wylie!” he barked at the man in the back office. “When you’ve finished sending that telegram, I’ve got another for you.”

He then coded Simon a swift response: *New bird found. Nesting with me.*



Incredible.”

Seated in his friend’s London study that afternoon, Marcus reread Captain Baird’s telegram. “What are the odds she would be living with the Bairds while plotting treason with her brother at Moorside?”

“Wait until you hear the rest,” Simon said from behind the desk. “I spoke with Alex before you arrived—”

“He telephoned you?” Marcus gripped the arms of the chair. “Blast it all, Simon! We cannot afford any more mistakes. That *means* absolute security!”

“Relax, friend.” He raised a hand. “I called Timbrell’s office from the Admiralty. Alex and I spoke only briefly, using the code, and no names were mentioned. According to him, when Miss Lockhart arrived in Gretna and got the job, there was a factory housing shortage. Hannah Baird, who incidentally works *for* Miss Lockhart at Moorside, suggested she board with the family. *And* our co-conspirator happens to work in the same site building with Alex.” He smiled. “Seems you and Timbrell called it right.”

Marcus worked his jaw, hardly appeased. His concern in sending Captain Baird for this mission had much to do with their closed-door meeting last year. He’d bent the rules for him with regard to his reckless brother, giving the captain his promise of silence in exchange for receiving compromised, albeit dated Allied intelligence, and the real prize—a photograph of a woman who turned out to be a prominent German spy.

He’d sensed there was more to the story, but the captain wasn’t talking. In the end, Marcus honored his promise, putting him on the hook for a future assignment.

This assignment. He frowned. The captain had the highest stakes in this mission, but those stakes could also be his weakness. And if he failed . . . “What did you tell *him*, Simon?”

“Not nearly enough.” His friend flashed a sullen look. “He’s expecting you to give him more information about Miss Lockhart.”

Easing back in his seat, Marcus glanced again at the cryptic telegram. He’d waited months for a break in this murderous chain, and now Alex Baird could monitor every move Rhymer’s sister made, both at the factory and at home.

But the chase was still in its early stages, and Marcus debated how much to tell him for the present. Alex would be in close contact with Miss Lockhart at work, at home, and in between. Would he overreact at some point and arouse her suspicions? The odds were good any man in those circumstances might let something slip and scare her off.

“Hand me something to write on.” He fished a pen from inside his breast pocket as Simon slid a sheet of paper toward him. Marcus scribbled the note, folded the paper in half, and handed it back to him. “Send him this.” He eyed him sharply. “And no more calls.”

Simon held his gaze while he opened the note. Scanning the words, his mouth whitened. “I dinna like this secret keeping, Marcus. Especially from Alex.”

Marcus stood and leaned against the desk. “Duly noted, Captain.”

He left the study to return to his office at Whitehall. He’d make no compromises, not this time. Their failure at Chilwell would haunt him for the rest of his days.

Marcus wasn’t about to add the weight of thousands more to his conscience.



TL possible key. Surveil only. Report daily Bonny Prince.

A prickle of unease crept down his spine as Alex stood beneath the large oak across from the post office after work that evening and read Simon's second coded message. He was to spy on Miss Lockhart. Why? And what did his friend mean, "possible key"? Did she know what was being planned at Moorside?

Frustration gnawed at him. Simon had been a clam on the telephone earlier. Alex frowned as he tried to recall all she'd told him about her past. Orphaned in Glasgow. No family. Worked for a wealthy English lady out of Perth before the auld woman died in Nottingham . . .

"I found work in a factory for a time, but all the while I was homesick for Scotland."

"Sweet heaven, Chilwell," he groaned, gripping the telegram. Had she been involved with that factory explosion? He nearly choked on the possibility, and then thought of another woman, Olivia Charles, who had been bent on destroying a brother he'd held dear.

Would Miss Lockhart be the one to bring his whole family to harm?

It was the memory of her peaceful beauty resting against his side that made him ache. Her expression, so free of guile or cunning. Could that be the face of treason?

His pulse thundered as he imagined confronting her and demanding her guilt, then having her arrested. A firing squad . . .

He took a deep breath, forcing calm. Again he glanced at the telegram. *Possible key*. What if she wasna culpable? Simon and Weatherford could just be fishing for answers, and they expected her to reveal . . . something. Though they didna want to scare her off before she did.

His hope flared. Miss Lockhart could be an innocent party to Rhymer's plan.

And your brother likely deluded himself in the same way with Miss

Charles.

Alex's mouth hardened. Either way, this change in duty was going to make it difficult to remain unaffected around her and keep from arousing her suspicions.

Once more he reflected back on their time together yesterday, the conversations they'd shared and her reactions. He found more proof in her compassion and kindness than any artfulness on her part, like with his struggle and grief over Ian's death, and her defense of the troublesome Miss Dunham, even giving the lass in her charge a second chance.

He did recall she objected to having her picture taken. *Was Miss Lockhart shy in front of a camera . . . or was she seeking to remain hidden?*

Alex tucked the telegram into his pocket and prayed the suspicions about her were wrong, for his family's sake if nothing else. *And not for your own, man?*

His shoulders hunched as he trekked along the dirt track toward home. It didn't seem possible she could be involved with a killer. Though as much as he dreaded his orders, if spying on her meant the eventual arrest of Rhymer, then Alex was more than willing to do it.



Dear Tilly, what should I do now?"

Seated on the bed, Rose rested her arms on her makeshift desk—Mrs. Baird's cutting board—and stared at the inscription written on the back of the photograph she'd brought with her from Attenborough. "*R and T—Rose and Me—Sisters of the heart we shall always be.*"

Flipping the picture to gaze at the pair of them, her mind drifted back to that May Day picnic. The spring air redolent with the fragrance of sweet peas and honeysuckle, while the factory band played "It's a Long Way to Tipperary" and the popular "Good-bye-ee!" The canteens feeding their munitionettes with army-sized portions of meat stews, bread puddings, chicken casseroles, and a special serving of fruitcakes and jam scones.

She'd come far since that day, leaving Nottingham to find a place for herself in Gretna, responsible for the work and welfare of several young girls. Her home with the Bairds and a new sense of belonging she hadn't felt in years.

Rose turned her attention back to the handwritten letter still lying unsigned against the cutting board. Her resignation from all of this, once she'd penned Tilly's name.

Earlier today she'd been thrilled to finally receive her wages, but then it struck her how naïve she was, thinking to find another job that paid as well. And leaving on such short notice without good cause would hardly recommend her for any kind of referral letter. And what about the football elimination games on Thursday? Mrs. Nash was counting on her. The Gretna Glycerin Girls needed to make the play-offs in order to compete against the Carlisle Munitionettes for the Challenge Cup on Saturday. If Rose left now, she'd receive no recommendation from her supervisor.

She *had* been fortunate the day Mrs. Nash hired her on the spot without a single reference from Chilwell. Rose could hardly be so lucky

a second time. Likely she'd have to settle for domestic work or another lesser-paying job. She might grow old before she ever earned enough to afford three ships' passages! And what would happen to her little brothers?

A sense of urgency filled her. She hadn't yet found another opportunity to call the school from her supervisor's office and check on them. Rose knew that the higher her earnings, the sooner she and the boys could leave and start their new lives abroad.

Winston's soft whine roused her from her gloom just before the dog jumped up onto the bed and tried crawling across the cutting board into her lap.

She replaced her precious photograph inside the half-packed valise beside her and removed the board to scoop her little dog into her arms. Indulging in his affections, she buried her face in his soft fur. He was still so white and smelling of lavender after his bath yesterday. And not a blue streak to be seen.

She still anguished at the thought of leaving him behind, but logic must prevail if she was to succeed. And with Fergus and James as his new companions, Winston would have a good home.

Saying good-bye to her Gretna family was going to be equally painful. From the very first, the Bairds had treated her like a daughter, accepting her without reservation. She'd selfishly enjoyed their affection these past few weeks, discovering for the first time in years a real sense of the home she remembered as a girl in Edinburgh. And if she was brutally honest, at times keeping her secret had less to do with hiding from Julien and more to do with being able to stay in this wonderful family. And Alex . . .

Lately in his company she'd been both surprised and disquieted as each smile from him, or warm gaze, or the way his voice gentled as he spoke to her deepened the stirrings in her heart, causing her to doubt her uncertainty toward him. She found herself more than pleased by their friendship, a miracle considering how badly they'd started off with each other.

Since their return from yesterday's outing, she'd relived in her mind several times those moments with him, their conversations and laughter and the way Alex had trusted her with his secrets. Something had changed between them, though she couldn't be certain what it was. A new softness perhaps, a new depth of caring . . .

Her face tinged with heat as she remembered her rude awakening in the lorry last evening. She'd been more at ease than she had in weeks

and simply fell asleep. Cozy and comfortable and secure, her worries over the past had vanished as she rested beside him.

But then she awoke, so serene at seeing his face, his green eyes dark with emotion—until she realized she'd practically lain on top of him all the way home!

A chuckle escaped her. She could not even look at him, poor man.

Yet as she'd neared the front door, it had occurred to her that Alex took great care in preserving her dignity. Keeping others away while he gently helped her out of the cab. Then making his excuses to return to the factory so she could walk inside on her own and recover from her embarrassment. Rose smiled. Her own Sir Knight.

Rubbing her cheek against Winston's soft fur, she let her eyes drift back to the cutting board and the as-yet-unsigned letter. Her dreamy mood gave way to a pang in her chest, as the desire to stay warred with her fear at being discovered. If only she knew the truth about Alex and his relationship with Julien!

Surely he couldn't know the fiend he'd chosen for a friend. He was such a different kind of man: thoughtful, unbridled in his affections. A stark contrast to Julien's cold indifference. She yearned for what Alex offered to others, the kind of love she'd lost and might never have again.

Don't forget you saw them posing together for the camera. Were pilots thick as thieves?

Carefully, she set Winston aside and returned the board with the letter to her lap. She couldn't afford to be wrong about Alex, not with her brothers' lives at stake. And accepting a lesser-paying job might take her longer to save, but it could mean their protection.

Lifting the pen, she signed Tilly's name, then folded and tucked the sheaf into an envelope. She would deliver the notice to Mrs. Nash first thing in the morning.

"Miss Lockhart? Supper's ready."

Rose startled at Hannah's voice. How would the family react to her leaving so suddenly? They hadn't been happy the last time she broached the subject when Alex decided to stay.

And what about her agreement to board for the full month? While Rose intended to pay them the additional week owing, she couldn't cover the rest of July *and* still have sufficient funds for . . . wherever she was going.

Climbing off the bed, she placed the letter on the nightstand and grabbed up her new rations book she planned to give to Mrs. Baird.

Then, smoothing her skirts, she went to open the door. Whatever their reaction, it was best to let them know now. "Come in, Hannah."

The girl glanced at Rose's traveling bag on the bed and drew a sharp breath. "Miss Lockhart, you're not leaving?" Tears brought a sudden sheen to her eyes.

"I think it is time that I did." Rose looked away with a sudden rush of guilt.

"'Tis my fault!" the girl cried. "I should have told you about the tricks the other lassies were up to at work, but I was scared . . ."

"Hannah, no." Rose reached to give her a hug. "I do not blame you."

She patted the distraught girl on the back and offered the fresh handkerchief tucked in her sleeve. While Hannah blew her nose, Rose agonized over how the rest of the family would take the news. "There are . . . reasons for my leaving that have nothing to do with you. I shall explain at supper."

Hannah nodded and tried to return the handkerchief. "You keep it." Rose smiled. "I will be out in a few minutes."

Once she left, Rose began pacing the floor. What would she tell them? She'd cited "personal reasons" in her resignation letter to Mrs. Nash, but the Bairds would ask too many questions she wasn't prepared to answer.

She'd first thought to claim her charges were simply too much to handle, forcing her to seek employment elsewhere. But after giving Gladys a second chance and their happy outing yesterday, the family would know it for a falsehood.

Besides that, after confronting Mr. Dobbs on Friday, Rose had noticed a change in attitude among the girls. Colleen and Betty hadn't quite warmed to her yet, but Rose was no longer the object of their vengeance. Overall, the girls treated her with new respect.

What if she complained that Mr. Dobbs continued to harass her? Alex had witnessed her altercation with the odious man, so he could hardly doubt it.

Leaving her room armed with an excuse, Rose arrived in the dining room and noticed at once the absence of any usual chatter. The food was set out on the table, but only the small boys had been served, while the mournful, frustrated, and distressed faces gazing up at her told her that Hannah had already broken the news.

Taking her place beside James, she felt all eyes upon her as they seemed anxious for her to explain. Especially Alex.

In fact, she'd barely placed her napkin on her lap when he turned on

her. "Exactly why do you feel the need to leave?"

Glancing up at him, she was jarred by his thunderous look. "I . . . have been dealing with some difficulty at work." She swung her gaze to Mrs. Baird, who sat blinking back tears, her rounded face edged in sorrow.

Mr. Baird's weary expression tore at her heart. Rose quickly returned her attention to Alex. "Some of the men have been harassing the girls, and me in particular . . ."

"Dobbs again? Was this today?"

"Yes, he and a few of his co-workers." She moistened her lips. "I have decided to seek employment elsewhere. Perhaps to the north."

"Miss Lockhart." Alex leaned against the table. "I made you a promise that he wouldna harm you. Have you forgotten?"

When she locked eyes with him, the memory of that promise conjured other images: the warm sun beating down on their shoulders, and her hand tucked securely within the strength of his arm; the sweet smell of tall grass as they stood beside the castle ruins of a Scottish king.

His words had held for her such protection, with her senses attuned to his being so near. "I seem to recall you did say that to me, but—"

"I also saw you stand up to that scunner. You didna blink an eye when you told him off." He inclined his head. "You showed the courage of a lioness that day. So why are you now letting him run you off like a scared rabbit?"

"Alex." Mr. Baird frowned at his son. "Miss Lockhart has her reasons for leaving, and we must respect that." To Rose he said, "Though I confess, lass, it breaks my heart to see you go. You've become our own in this short time, and your help to Mairi has been a godsend."

Rose couldn't form any words around the lump in her throat. This was more difficult than she'd imagined. Beside her at the table, James gave her a nudge. When she looked down at him, he grinned and held up a green pea between his fingers. As he reached toward his nose, her sudden urge to laugh collided with an ache the size of Scotland and she gently pried the pea from his grasp.

"I am truly sorry." She looked around the table at all of them, horrified when her voice began to break. "I . . . I really should go."

"I'll talk with Dobbs tomorrow. Set him straight. That goes for his followers too." Alex's voice was like granite. "I made you a promise, lass. I plan to keep it."

Rose offered him a weak smile. Despite her worry over his friendship

with Julien, she would miss him terribly. "I am certain you would wish to have your own room back, Alex." *And your bed.*

Faint color singed his cheeks as though he'd read her last thought. When he looked away, Rose withdrew the rations book and handed it across the table to Mrs. Baird. "I want to go with you to the shops in the morning before I leave, and you are welcome to my rations."

"Och, ye must keep the book for yerself!" Mrs. Baird tried giving it back.

"Please, it is the least I can do since I will not be staying the full month. And my thanks to you for the wonderful food." She pressed her lips, then added, "I would also appreciate it if you kept my dog—"

"Aye, we want Winston!" Fergus and James shouted together.

"Hush now!" their mother scolded before she turned her teary eyes back to Rose. In the barest of whispers she said, "I feel as though I'm losing a bairn all over again . . ."

"She's not leaving!" Alex slammed a fist on the table, making everyone jump, including Rose. "Miss Lockhart." He hesitated. "May I call you Tilda?"

Rose gaped at him before she managed to squeak, "Tilly."

"Tilly, then." He smiled, though it seemed somewhat stiff. "I dinna want my room back, if that's why you're leaving." His Adam's apple bobbed up and down as he swallowed. "The bed in Fergus and James's room will suit me fine."

Ian's bed. Compassion filled her, knowing what it cost him to say the words.

He reached for her hand. "There's no need to fash about Dobbs or his thugs either, not while I'm around." His touch was warm against her skin. "Stay with us, Tilly." He scanned the other faces at the table. "None of us wants you to go."

Rose stared at his roughened hand covering hers and then looked up at him, searching his face for any sign of deception. Could she trust him?

She looked to the others, her chest aching as the need to remain with them warred with her fear. Each nodded at her, faces hopeful, some eyes wet, all of them smiling with affection.

Rose drew a shaky breath. "If you're certain . . ."

A cheer went up around the table—first Hannah, then Fergus, then James who looked confused but cheered, and finally Mr. and Mrs. Baird, who reached for her, the woman's face awash in happiness.

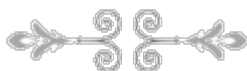
When their joy was spent, Rose turned to Alex. Leaning back in his

chair, arms crossed, he watched her with an unreadable expression. Had she made a mistake?

She offered him a hesitant smile, more a plea than a gesture of friendship. And then she waited, hardly daring to breathe.

Seconds passed—an eternity—before he tipped his head and returned her smile.

Drawing breath, Rose eased back in her seat, her world all at once brighter. *“For I know the plans I have for you . . . plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”* Jeremiah’s blessing. The Bible verse Mum and Dad had prayed over her and her brothers each night. Rose silently added her own prayer—that being here was God’s plan, allowing her this time to savor the love the Baird family wanted to give her. That she need not fear Alex, despite his association with Julien, but could trust him to protect her and help her safeguard her dream.



Seeing her relief, Alex hid his own beneath a tight smile. Simon and Weatherford wanted her watched and that couldna happen if he let her slip away.

But why had Tilly really wanted to leave Gretna? He doubted Dobbs was still causing her grief. Alex had sought out the union steward and his cronies earlier today, and though they still grumbled, the men seemed resigned to the situation of the leaky tank and had moved past their grudge with Tilly Lockhart and her crew.

If he just had more information to go on! But Simon hadna offered him even a hint where Tilly was concerned, and Alex resented being left in the dark.

Did he and Weatherford not trust him with all the facts?

Maw seemed happy with Tilly’s decision to stay as she smiled broadly and passed him a steaming plate of rumbledethumps. He tucked into the mashed tatties and cheese while the same question kept revolving in his mind. *Was Dobbs harassing her?* Despite his own observations today, had he been mistaken?

Tilly also fashed about having taken his room. Maybe she’d caught him sleeping on the couch? He chewed his food slowly. Either way, she’d drawn him out, and now he had no choice but to sleep in Ian’s auld bed and like it. Proving to her that she was welcome to stay.

Alex just prayed she wasna playacting to secure a hiding place or an alibi for some unscrupulous reason. His family meant everything to him.

He would not fail them again.



DOVER CLIFFS

KENT, BRITAIN

TUESDAY, JULY 23—NEXT DAY

Was your flight from Paris satisfactory, Effendi?" Emin Tabak called over the wind.

Nodding, Didymos Kahverengi stared in amusement at his older, dark-haired manservant. The chill gusts sweeping in off Dover's coast billowed their clothing as the two paused along the trail above the chalky cliffs some distance from the lighthouse. He'd given up wearing his hat and held it in his grip, while Emin stubbornly clamped his fedora onto his head with both hands.

The comical sight of his distress served to lighten Kahverengi's mood, especially after his pointless meeting at dawn with Dexter at *Cimetière du Calvaire*. It was bad enough the earl's son arrived empty-handed, but knowing he'd been selling the same secrets to the British munitions magnate, Sir Ridley Cutler, further enraged him.

Kahverengi ground his teeth. He should have left the wastrel to bleed out behind the Paris gambling hall and found another *muhbir* to take his place.

Emin suddenly lost his grip on the fedora, sending the hat tumbling along the short grass farther inland. As he raced to catch it, Kahverengi laughed and struck out toward the lighthouse.

Minutes later, on the lee side of the structure, Emin joined him, breathing heavily as he replaced the runaway hat on his head. "This is . . . far better here, Effendi. Thank you."

Kahverengi gazed fondly at the man who had saved his life. He'd been just fifteen when Emin found him half dead in the Australian outback after making his escape from that plantation for homeless boys. "Hell," he'd called it, his years of suffering abuse in silence.

Since that day, his manservant had been faithful, including bringing him the good news in a telegram he'd received this morning before his flight out of Paris. "So it is true, Emin? She is at Moorside?"

"Indeed, Effendi. And a happy day." Emin smiled. "She is working at Site Three. My source tells me she has been there just over two weeks."

"I thought she was lost to us." Kahverengi breathed deeply as new energy coursed through him. "I am glad I was mistaken. Where is she staying? The hostels for factory workers?"

"She lives at the home of Captain Alex Baird and his family in Gretna Green."

"Ah, I see. Then it is time to start making plans for Rhymer." He arched a brow. "Have you seen her?"

Emin shook his head. "I just learned of the news. Shall I make contact?"

"*Hayir*, not yet. We both know there are many eyes on her." He frowned. "It still disturbs me that she's made no contact since our last event."

"But she is loyal, Effendi." Emin's dark gaze searched his. "She proved it."

"She did," he agreed, nodding. "Still, you must watch and wait to see what your sources reveal."

He lifted his gaze to the powerful lamp mounted high above the lighthouse. A beacon overlooking the coast, illuminating for miles a path to those lost in the mist and wishing to come home. Perhaps *he* would find home once this last deed was finished, though it pleased him to continue tormenting Scotland Yard, making them pay for what they had done to him.

He glanced back at Emin. "You are confident your sources will continue to provide you with information about her?"

"Yes, Effendi. I will keep you advised."

"*Çok iyi*." He nodded again, pleased. "I must get back, but keep me informed. When the time is right, I will have Rhymer contact her." He reached to lay a hand on his friend's shoulder. "And soon the two of them can finish what we have started."



GREटना

WEDNESDAY, JULY 24—NEXT DAY

I appreciate the offer of help, Alex, but you needn't take up your time."

Rose glanced at Alex as he walked beside her toward the train. "Your mother and I can see to the food shopping well enough on our own."

She'd rushed out of work once the shift ended and planned to meet Mrs. Baird at Malcolm's Grocers in Gretna. They tried going yesterday, but with the new rationing system, hundreds of munitions workers and other families had already queued up at the shops in town to claim their quotas of food.

"But I have a scheme that should work today." He held up his own rations book. "We'll lay siege to the food shops in true clan fashion."

"But I am not in your clan."

"Of course you are."

"Is that so?" She smiled at him, warmed by his words. "Then I suppose you may come along. Your mother and I will let you carry the groceries."

"Your Majesty." He bowed. "I am ever your Sir Knight."

Rose grinned. "I think it is time you had a promotion." She reached to touch each of his shoulders with her rations book. "I now dub thee Chancellor of the Pack Mule."

His hearty laughter made her whole being shimmer with pleasure, and then she jumped as the train's whistle blew the one-minute warning before departure. "We must hurry! I intend to get a seat in the first car before the others start spilling out of the factory with the same idea."

"Let's go!"

They took off at a half run to catch the train before it ran the circuit back into town.

Rose settled into her seat, acutely aware when Alex took the place directly beside her. Not for the first time, she noticed his marked attention toward her, especially after her decision on Monday to remain at the cottage. And last night she'd crept out into the parlor, relieved to see the couch empty of his sleeping form.

She imagined him lying in his brother's old bed. How it must disquiet him when he bore the weight of Ian's death on his shoulders. "How are you sleeping these days?" she asked.

Their eyes met, and she caught an almost imperceptible flare in the green depths. "Well enough. Da was right. With your wee dog around to tire them out, Fergus and James nod off as soon as their heads hit the pillow."

"I'm glad you are getting some rest, Alex." She held his look another moment before turning to the open window, staring out at the extensive munitions complex as the train chugged toward Gretna's platform. The breeze was still balmy this late in the afternoon and pungent with the brackish waters of the Solway.

"Tell me, do you ever miss working in Nottingham?"

She turned to him with a guarded look. "Why do you ask?"

"Curiosity." He shrugged, though his gaze seemed intent. "I thought maybe you left friends behind when you came here? You now have several lassies at work hanging on your every word, including my sister." He smiled. "Hannah is devoted to you."

"Why, thank you, Alex." His kind words touched her—and added to the burden of her own regret at having to prevaricate once more. "I . . . did supervise several workers with my last job, though I was not as close to them as I am with your sister and the others." Her need for honesty made her add, "I did have one very close friend, but she died."

Rose looked away, haunted by the image of the scorched patch of earth where Tilly had been working. "It was shortly after that I decided to come home to Scotland."

"I'm sorry." He reached for her hand, and her pulse leapt. "How did she die?"

"We had . . . an explosion. She did not survive."

His grip tightened, and Rose looked up in alarm. Again his gaze pierced her, his face taut. "Was it Chilwell?"

She blinked. "You know?"

"It was in the papers. I'm truly sorry, lass." He squeezed her hand more gently this time. "I am glad you found us here in Gretna." He swiveled his attention back toward the approaching platform. "Looks

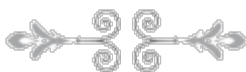
like our stop.”

Rose knitted her brows, eyeing him. How had he guessed which factory in Nottingham she worked for? The newspapers had been vague about the explosion and its location, and Rose hadn’t told a soul in Gretna—except Mrs. Nash, for it was on her employment application.

Had Alex spoken with her supervisor?

“I hope I didn’t make you uneasy, bringing up the past,” he said as he turned back to her.

“Of course not.” She offered a smile. Though it *had* disturbed her, she would say nothing. After all, she’d done the same to him with regard to his brother.



At least she didn’t lie.

Alex allowed her to exit the train first, relieved Tilly had been truthful with him. He suspected Chilwell was the factory after reading Simon’s telegram, and it now reinforced his earlier impression, that perhaps she’d seen or knew something Weatherford chose to glean from her without her knowledge. Would it lead them closer to the same saboteur who had destroyed that factory?

Last night before he left work, he tried contacting Simon, first at the Admiralty and then at home—only to learn from the bemused housekeeper, Mrs. Kerr, that “Mrs. Forrester went into hospital to have her bairn, and Captain Baird should contact ‘the bonny prince,’ if necessary, as Captain Weatherford is unavailable.”

Though he was delighted his friends were about to become parents, Alex made the decision to borrow another truck and drive to East Fortune in the morning to see the “bonny prince” in person. Since the football teams had elimination games at Baxter’s Farm most of the day, Tilly would be away from the factory while he was gone.

Alex hoped Stuart could shed more light as to why the War Office was so interested in her.

They arrived at Malcolm’s Grocers and spotted his maw waiting in line to get food.

“I’ve an idea to save us time,” he said as the three met up. “Maw, you stay here at Malcolm’s while I go and sign up for rations at Croser’s, the new market across from the community center. Tilly can

start at Jenner Meats across the street from Croser's and then we'll all switch until we've got our rations and registered with each of the stores."

"Divide and conquer. Is that what clans do?" Tilly gave him an arched look, her eyes shining.

He grinned. "Aye. The Bairds have been known to be a fierce lot."

His maw chuckled behind them as he and Tilly struck out farther into town. As they reached their destination, each stepped into lines across the street from each other.

Alex scanned the queues, noting they had thinned from yesterday. Once the food controller issued the ration books to a nation already short on food, the line had stretched clear back to the train depot.

Line or no line, he was still grateful to be here and to help contribute to his family. Fergus was starting to get a real appetite, and his own could be considerable after a day of work and chopping wood. During the past two nights, he'd also started repairing the damaged roof shingles, determined to help his da as much as possible before returning to France.

He glanced at Tilly across the street as she slowly moved forward in the queue for the butcher. Such a crowd of bodies made the afternoon heat oppressive. Seeing her wipe her face with a handkerchief, Alex twitched at the sweat rolling down his back beneath his clothes. He looked forward to sitting out on the porch later tonight and enjoying the cool breeze once the sun had set.

He was only three customers away from being served when he glanced behind him at a crowd of men and women coming from the train. As the second wave of hungry workers converged upon the city to take their places in line, a loud voice caught his attention.

Taller than most, Dobbs was easy to pick out as he shoved his way through a group of women, heading toward the butcher's shop. Alex tensed as he watched the union man pace up and down the line at Jenner Meats like a cat ready to pounce.

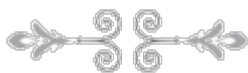
Dobbs slowed as he drew nearer to Tilly. Alex growled and cursed under his breath.

Her eyes widened, and she stepped back as he towered over her.

Alex started to leave his line, intending to go and help her. Then he glanced back to see that just one person remained ahead of him. He stared at the rations book in his hand, then glanced back at Tilly.

She'd straightened, shoulders back, looking ready to face down Dobbs.

He would wait a few more seconds . . .



Rose recovered her composure and craned her neck to stare at the ogre in front of her. “Mr. Dobbs, good day.”

“Let me in line.”

He dipped forward then, and Rose caught a whiff of alcohol.

The man was drinking so soon after his shift? She squared her shoulders. “That would not be fair to the others, Mr. Dobbs. You must wait your turn at the end of the line.”

“That so? And would ye like me to tell this hardworkin’ lot behind ye that yer leavin’ work early so’s to get here first?” He turned to the shift workers queued up behind her. “What d’ye think, lads? Management can cut out o’ work whenever they like, while us poor blokes carry the load and then pay for it when the food’s gone by the time it’s our turn.”

Rose followed his gaze and saw the mass of grumbling faces, many of them women, nodding and frowning to one another. “I left when our shift was over,” she called to them. “The same as you. I just caught the first train, that is all.”

“But yer not the same as us, are ye?” Dobbs announced to the crowd. “Yer pretty speech an’ yer shoddy workers.”

“Now, you just wait one minute, sir.” Fuming, Rose didn’t care one whit about herself, but she refused to let him speak badly about her girls. She glared at the man, again seeing Julien’s dark eyes and cold gaze. “You have obviously been drinking, Mr. Dobbs, and so I’ll assume the alcohol has made you slip. But you will not speak to me in that fashion or talk disparagingly about my workers. They are fine girls who do a good job at the factory.”

From the corner of her eye, Rose spied several of the women in line nodding again to each another but without the frowns. She turned back to the ogre. “Furthermore, you will go to the back of the line just like anyone else. Why should you get ahead of these good people?”

Rose did turn to the line then, and the many faces had changed from angry to righteous. “Hear, hear, Dobbs! Get to the back o’ the line. Yer only the union steward, not the Almighty!” one of them shouted.

Several guffaws erupted from the crowd, and Dobbs stepped closer to her.

“You must be thick, man, to keep tangling with the lass.”

Suddenly Alex was there, as tall as Dobbs and standing a few feet away, his arms laden with packages. "You heard her and these good folks. Get to the back of the line."

"Looks like yer reinforcements arrived," Dobbs sneered at her. "Saving ye once again."

"Maybe the drink's gone to your head, Dobbs." Alex tipped his gaze toward the crowd. "Because I could swear Miss Lockhart did her own saving."

"That she did!" An older woman in a mobcap cried from the line, looking at the others, who nodded.

"Aye, she's fit tae take on all comers!" cried another, a young woman. Rose was startled to see her Dublin girl, Colleen Shire, standing alongside Betty Pierce. "She's our gaffer and ye'd better not cross 'er if ye know what's good for ye."

Rose met the two pairs of shining eyes while both girls touched their caps to her.

"Move along, Dobbs!" came another shout from the crowd, and the union man snarled as he pushed past Alex. Instead of getting in line, he stalked down the street toward a local canteen.

"Would you like help with those packages?" she asked Alex once he'd left.

He merely shook his head, a proud gleam in his eyes. All at once her heart soared, and she realized that for the first time since leaving her childhood behind in Edinburgh, she *had* reclaimed a sense of herself, who she had been, who she *was* . . . and the sudden urge to cry mingled with her joy. *You have your courage back, Rose.*

She could keep on fighting and following her dream, not only because she'd face down her Goliath a second time but also because she'd gained the respect and acceptance of her girls.

A few of the other workers in line cheered her. Misty-eyed, Rose smiled back at them.

And best of all . . . She turned to the tall, handsome man beside her. Alex Baird had helped her find her wings.



EAST FORTUNE

THURSDAY, JULY 25

Sweet heaven, how he missed this freedom.

Alex parked the truck in front of RAF East Fortune's headquarters the following day and sat in the cab watching a new prototype of the Sopwith buzz overhead. The whine of the plane's engines and the smell of petrol combined with the sweet grass of the airfield to tantalize his senses.

He'd climbed out of the truck and headed toward the door when Colonel Landon came outside. "Captain Baird, this is a surprise."

"Colonel." Alex checked himself before offering a salute. He was a civilian now. "Thought I'd stop in to see my auld pal if he's around. Lieutenant Stuart?"

"You might try the officers' mess. Thursdays they serve a brunch." A smile rose beneath the salt-and-pepper mustache. "You timed that well, Captain, if you'd care to join them."

"I can always eat." Alex grinned and then looked up at the Sopwith overhead. "That's a fine machine."

"We do testing here now as well as training." The colonel squinted up at the gray sky. "Strictly need-to-know basis, of course."

"Understood, sir."

Alex gave a brisk nod and headed for the dining mess. Lured by the delicious smells of kippers and eggs, he made his way toward the Nissen hut when a familiar Irish brogue sounded behind him.

"That be ye, Captain Baird?"

Alex turned and smiled. "Cadet Donovan, good to see you, lad."

"And ye as well, sir." The young cadet grinned. "Are ye here tae see the colonel?"

"No, I stopped in to say hello to Lieutenant Stuart and catch up with

him.”

“Ye know the lieutenant’s been my flight instructor since ye left?”

“Has he? And how is flight training coming along, Cadet?”

Donovan’s freckles reddened. “Mostly ground training in the simulators where we practice maneuvering and shooting.” His eyes lit up. “But a week ago, I flew up for the first time with Lieutenant Stuart! Before ye know it, I’ll go solo and have my wings and fly tae France for the real fight.”

Alex smiled at Donovan’s eagerness, even as he prayed the lad would make it through the war in one piece. “Godspeed, Cadet.”

“Thank ye, Captain.” Beaming, Donovan gestured toward the airfield and the array of tents. “I saw Lieutenant Stuart going into his tent a few minutes ago. Second from the right, and once yer inside, all the way back.”

“I’m obliged.” Alex would forfeit his meal to get answers about Tilly Lockhart. “If I dinna see you before I go, take care of yourself.”

“Aye, sir.” The cadet slipped him a quick salute, then winked before he rushed off toward the mess.

Alex strode across the field, occasionally glancing up to watch the plane perform in the skies. If he could just be up there right now taking her through her paces!

He remembered sharing with Tilly his plans for the future, the coming age of airmail service and his decision to keep flying. As he gazed up at the Sopwith, like a bird soaring overhead, he imagined Tilly with him as they crossed the skies over Britain and beyond.

Dream on, lad. Alex shook his head. Duty came first, and right now his job was to find out why Weatherford and the War Office were so keen to have her watched.

He found Stuart at the back of the tent, scraping a razor across his face.

“Captain Baird, good to see you!” The lieutenant had seen his approach through the small mirror over the washstand and turned to greet Alex. “Anything wrong?”

“I took a few hours off and thought I’d take a drive this way.” He eyed Stuart. “You dinna think it late in the day for a shave?”

“Aye.” Stuart turned back to the mirror. “But I hopped another supply train during the wee hours and just got back from London.”

London? Alex stared at Stuart’s reflection. “What about my updates?”

“Relax, Captain. I was gone only a few days. I received orders to check in at the War Office and so I had the airfield forward you

telegrams to Captain Weatherford's detective at Scotland Yard. I'm sorry to tell you they didn't come up with anything on the names you sent last week. Though that union steward Dobbs is a hooligan, stirring up the munitions workers at Moorside."

He dipped the razor into the washbasin. "Have a seat while I finish and tell me what really brings you here. Have you another suspect?"

Alex took a seat on one of the empty bunks behind him and scanned the tent to be sure they were alone. "I want to know more about Tilda Lockhart."

"Aye, Miss Lockhart." Stuart worked the blade up from the right side of his jawline. "I was told she's living with you." His foamy face grinned in the mirror. "Is she bonny?"

Alex stood. "'Tis not what you think, Stuart."

"Ah, so she is bonny." The lieutenant arched a blond brow in the mirror. "You're a jammy man to have that duty." He took a pass at his chin with the razor. "What does she look like?"

When Alex hesitated, Stuart straightened and turned. "Och, man, I'm stuck here in this hole all week with nothing to look at but scores of pocked-faced laddies fresh from home. Show me a wee bit of mercy, will you?"

Alex scowled. "She's got dark hair and blue eyes. Slim and not too tall."

"That's all I get?"

"Aye." Alex bristled. "Now your turn. Why have I been assigned to keep an eye on her?"

"What have you been told?"

"Only that she's a possible key, whatever that means. It doesn't tell me a thing."

"No, you're right. Did you know that she was at Chilwell?"

He nodded. "I figured that out from what she'd told us and then she admitted it to me yesterday."

"Us?"

"Me and my family."

"What else did she say?"

Alex sneered. "So like you sly devils, asking more than you're telling."

Stuart finished the last pass with his razor, then wiped his face with a towel. "All right." Tossing the towel onto the washstand, he faced Alex. "Because she was at Chilwell, the War Office believes she might recognize Rhymer if he's at Moorside."

Alex sat down again, his relief mingled with a guarded sense of hope. "So they dinna believe she's involved in the actual explosion?"

"Well, I wouldna rule anything out." He shrugged. "But they seem to think otherwise. What are your thoughts?"

But Alex was envisioning Tilly in Gretna yesterday, giving Dobbs a good tongue-lashing and winning over the crowd with her cry against injustice. A smile touched his lips. He'd never been more proud.

"What has you amused?"

He glanced at Stuart. "I'm just glad to get answers." Leaning forward, he rested his arms against his thighs. "But why do they want to keep it from her? Why not just ask Tilly to watch for anyone who looks familiar instead of having me play the spy?"

Stuart leaned against the framework of the opposite bunk. "I think they're fashing over the possibility she'll let the cat out of the bag. Better to have her stop and say hello to an auld face so we can go in and nab him rather than have her running the other way and scaring him off. Rhymer's been canny so far, and I believe he'd sniff out a trap in a minute."

Alex sighed. Stuart was right, though it seemed a much slower process. Especially when the urgency to find Kahverengi's man was increasing daily.

And after the way she handled herself in town yesterday, he knew Tilly could be brought in on the assignment without giving herself away. But he had his orders, and until he could speak with Simon or Weatherford about it directly, he must stay the course.

His spirits lifted as he rose to his feet. Stuart's explanation only served to further convince him she was innocent. "Think I'll head over to the mess and grab some food before I take off."

"I'll come along." Stuart grinned as he reached for his shirt and tie. "You ken that the real benefit of being here is that there's always enough to eat."

"Aye." Alex flashed a rueful smile. "The new ration laws have all of us 'civilians' counting our beans and our bacon."

They strode from the tent toward the mess. "How's Donovan doing?"

"The laddie's got potential. Like most of the cadets, he's impatient to fly and dislikes all the ground practice. I took him up last week, and he's eager to stay in the air."

"I remember those days." Alex gave a wistful smile. "But I'm grateful for the new Gosport style of training. 'Tis saving the lives of many young pilots."

“And that many more for the Huns to get their hands on.”

Alex sobered thinking about his brother’s meaningless death. “Aye, but ’tis better to die for a good reason than not.”

Stuart met his gaze. “True enough, Captain.”

They soon arrived at the mess, and after an hour and a half spent talking with the instructors and cadets and savoring oat porridge, beans, sausages, black pudding, bacon, eggs, and tattie scones—a feast Alex hadn’t enjoyed in weeks—he and Stuart departed for Alex’s truck.

“So how about I drive over to Gretna next week, Captain? That way I can see your bonny lassie for myself.”

“She’s not mine.” Alex climbed into the cab and, after setting the throttle, frowned at Stuart. “And ’tis a bad idea. If you’re in Gretna, who will I make my reports to?”

“We can both keep an eye on her. Just a day or two.” Stuart’s eyes gleamed. “You can see her at work, and since I’m an auld friend, invite me over to supper so I might meet her at home.” He glanced back toward the Nissen huts. “I’m desperate for wee bit of softer scenery, man.”

“What about London?”

Stuart made a face. “I dinna consider my meetings with a bunch of auld men in uniform scintillating.” His eyes pleaded. “Come on, pal, what do you say? Share a bit of the wealth?”

Alex glowered at him. The mere thought of this Casanova ogling Tilly set his teeth on edge. “Like I said, bad idea. With two of us watching her, she’ll get suspicious.”

He knew his words for a lie, as more likely Tilly’s head would be turned by Stuart’s brash good looks. Still, he wasna letting the scunner anywhere near her.

He started to climb back out of the truck to crank over the engine when Stuart halted his progress, his blue eyes full of devilment. “Like it or not, Captain, when Rhymer does show his face, you’ll have to get used to seeing me in Gretna. My orders are to move in once we have a confirmation.”

“Then I’ll let you know when that happens. Until then, stay here and I’ll send you my updates.”

Stuart grinned knowingly before he went to the front and cranked over the truck’s engine. Then he raised a hand in parting, and while Alex turned the truck around, he yelled, “See you next week!”

“Over my dead body,” Alex muttered to himself before he increased the throttle. As the truck leapt forward, he gripped the wheel and

drove in the direction of home.

Aye, Tilly Lockhart didna belong to him. *Yet.*



GREटना

FRIDAY, JULY 26—NEXT DAY

Did you need something, Captain?"

Rose looked up from her desk where she'd been recording on index cards the work hours and any incident reports for her young charges.

Alex Baird's tall frame leaned against the doorjamb. "Just keeping my promise, lass," he said, smiling, and her pulse gave a pleasurable start. In the few days since she'd agreed to stay on with his family in Gretna, he seemed to be everywhere she turned. Whether she was speaking with Mrs. Nash in her office or supervising her girls in the nitroglycerine section, her silent watchman was always close by. Except for yesterday when she'd coached her football team through the factory's elimination games at Baxter's Farm. And because her Glycerin Girls had played fabulously, they'd been selected to go up against Carlisle at Saturday's Summer Sports Day.

"So, are you ready for the Challenge Cup tomorrow?" he asked.

Had he read her thoughts? Rose certainly hoped they were ready. It was all Hannah could talk about at supper last night. "I think my girls are in fine form, and despite a constant cough, Jane has done well as our team goalie. Your sister's turned out to be an impressive halfback, too." Pride filled her voice, but Rose didn't care. Her charges had come far in the past few weeks, and in more ways than one. She still warmed at the memory of Colleen and Betty touching their brims during her second confrontation with the odious Mr. Dobbs in town the other evening.

And while she understood Alex didn't doubt her ability to take care of herself, Rose admittedly had no idea if or how the offensive union man might claim his revenge for humiliating him in front of his fellow workers.

Collecting her index cards, she tucked them back inside the small filing box and rested her hands on the desk. "I am grateful for your efforts, Alex, but I think I'm safe enough. Mr. Dobbs works at the opposite end of the building."

"'Tis lunchtime, and the men's canteen is less than twenty yards past this office." He eyed her, his strong features determined. "I just wanted to make sure he and his union lads didna stop in here along the way."

She pressed her lips together to keep from smiling. He really was being gallant. "What about you? Should you not go and eat as well? I imagine following me around all morning has made you hungry."

"Aye." He pushed away from the doorjamb. "Chasing after you can surely work up a man's appetite."

Rose flushed with heat at the glint in his eyes. Primly, she said, "Perhaps, Captain, you should consider keeping an eye on the wolves rather than the sheep? It would be less exhausting."

"Aye, but not nearly as pleasant."

Again he gave her the look that sent her pulse racing. Self-preservation made her glance at the wall clock. "Since it is lunchtime, I really must go."

His heavy sigh echoed across the office, and she stifled another grin.

He grabbed for the doorknob. "I'll see you later, then. Watch yourself."

She nodded, and once he'd closed the door behind him, her relief mingled with a sense of loss. In truth, she quite enjoyed his company and she also trusted Alex. Even her fears about his spying for Julien now seemed absurd.

Rose wasn't certain when her feelings for him had changed, only that her awareness of him had become stronger, the stirrings in her heart more widespread until the mere thought of him seemed to encompass her entire being.

Was that love?

Abruptly she rose from her chair. Indeed, she'd come to care about him, and more than she should. One thing was certain—Alex spent far too much time watching her during the day, and she wondered when he had time to work at his post. What if her invented excuse for wanting to leave Gretna ended up getting him the sack?

I must put a stop to this. She would catch him after work and make him listen to reason. He and his family could ill afford his loss of wages, and it would be *her* fault.

Rose left the office and headed toward the ladies' canteen. Since

she'd made the decision to stay on at the factory, she had money coming in and could occasionally afford to charge lunches against her pay and save on the Baird family's foodstuffs.

And no more worries about tricks with her food.

She chuckled. Not that she was too concerned these days when most of the "rough girls" in her charge seemed to *want* to work for her. Rose was still amazed at her own audacity in town on Wednesday. Had she really managed to turn the tables on Mr. Dobbs and accuse *him* of taking advantage of his fellow workers?

Her dad had always told her that she was "a canny lass," but until recently that confidence had been undermined, through years of her uncle's silent contempt and then Julien's cold disdain.

Until now.

Rose smiled as she relived the moment in her mind, standing up to Dobbs and the crowd cheering what she had to say. And Alex, gazing at her as though he believed she could conquer the world.

The pleasurable memory continued as she arrived at the canteen and made her way into the food line. *Oh, Tilly, if you could be here and see me now, would you believe it?*

"Miss Lockhart! Can we ask you a question?"

Still smiling, Rose received her lunch order and walked over to Hannah's table. The girl sat with Gladys, Jane, Colleen, Betty, Dorothy, and Sarah—most of their team. "Are you all excited about the game tomorrow?" They nodded, and Rose added proudly, "I have no doubt the Carlisle Munionettes will rue the day they took on the Gretna Glycerin Girls."

"Thanks, Miss Lockhart!" they chorused, their sallow faces turning rosy with pleasure.

It was Gladys who spoke up. "Me an' Colleen moved outta Timber Town last week t'share rent at Betty's flat in town." The girl glanced at the others. "We want t'know, Miss Lockhart, would ye consider joinin' us for afternoon tea on Sunday? Hannah and Dorothy and Sarah and Jane, too."

Jane coughed then, while Hannah and the others beamed.

Gladys turned to Rose. "That is, if ye'd think it proper. An' I figure we could talk about the win." She winked at the other girls.

For an instant, Rose eyed them slack-jawed. "Why . . . thank you for the invitation, Gladys. It is most kind of you." She scanned the faces of the other girls, making certain her instincts hadn't been wrong. Yet as she met each shy look and nervous smile, her heart melted. "I would be

pleased to come along with Hannah on Sunday for tea. At four?"

Gladys released a happy sigh and smiled at her coworkers. "Thank ye, Miss Lockhart. Four would be jus' grand."

"We'd be 'onored tae 'ave ye," Colleen said with uncharacteristic softness as she lifted dark eyes to Rose. "An' if yer fine with it, we'll ask two others lasses from the nitrocotton section to come over as well." She bowed her head. "They were with us in line at the butcher's on Wednesday, and now they're keen tae make yer acquaintance."

Rose blinked in startled pleasure. "Of course, you may invite whomever you like."

It was the first time she'd ever seen Colleen smile, the receding gums and missing teeth likely from the acid fumes. The girl touched the edge of her bonnet. "Thank ye kindly."

Betty spoke up. "I'll drop off the address at yer office, Miss Lockhart."

Rose nodded, her heart full to bursting as she continued toward the supervisors' table. To know she'd somehow made a positive impact on these girls after all filled her with such gratitude and joy. *Lord, thank you for showing me another sign that I should be here. Helping other lost girls make a difference in their lives.*

Her mood still hummed later that afternoon when she returned to her office. Taking a seat in the chair, she reached for the small filing box on the desk and saw beneath it a parchment envelope with the name MISS TILDA LOCKHART typed across its front.

How lovely! Reaching for her letter opener, she smiled over the tea invitation as she opened the missive. Then, scanning the note, her high spirits of moments ago plummeted.

Peekaboo, Miss Lockhart, I see you
My net is wide, so you cannot hide
There is a post due at Gretna for you
So do not wait to meet thy fate

Rose stared at the somewhat ominous lines. Who had left this message for her? Whoever it was knew her and where she worked.

Surely not her charges in the canteen. She frowned. Millie Parson hadn't been at lunch with the others; in fact, except for the play-offs yesterday, the girl had been absent for a few days. And today at work, Rose noticed her brooding most of the morning.

Did Millie have cause to be angry with her? Enough that the girl would compose this poem in order to play some kind of prank as the

others had once done?

Rose's shoulders slumped as she folded the note and slipped it back inside the envelope. Here she'd thought to finally succeed in guiding these girls and changing their lives for the better. But it seemed she'd failed to break through the glass wall surrounding Millie's heart.

So much for your pride, Rose Graham. Frustrated, she tucked the missive into her smock pocket. Perhaps she should meet with Millie later today, before the problem festered further. Once they had talked things over, the girl might soften.

Rose could hope anyway.



Bird laid no eggs.

Alex bit back an impatient sigh as he handed Mr. Wylie his message for Stuart. Upon receiving his receipt, he left the post office and returned on the train to Moorside. Lunch was almost over, and he'd made sure before leaving that Tilly was surrounded in the canteen by her co-workers.

Once again he'd sent in the same report—*nothing*. And with Dobbs cleared along with the other names on the lists he'd been sending, Alex was out of patience—and suspects.

Tilly had yet to acknowledge anyone from Chilwell, and at this rate it was like looking for a toothpick in a woodpile. Rhymer could slip in and slip out again, leaving Moorside in ashes and the town destroyed before anyone realized what had happened.

He ground his teeth. She could aid in their quest and speed things along if Weatherford would let him reveal to her his mission here. Alex resented the decision to keep her unaware, and if he wasna bound by his duty, he'd enlist her help. Tilly had the ability to think clearly and that's what was needed if they were to find and apprehend Rhymer.

Five days. All that remained until Moorside's month of demise, and Weatherford was cutting his strategy way too close. Tilly had a stake in her own safety too, and the possibility she might walk innocently into a trap with their saboteur made him furious.

Arriving back at the factory, he paused at her office, and seeing the empty space he made his way toward her work section.

She stood at the vat tables, examining Hannah's hands, his sister's face pinched in pain.

He quickly approached. "What's the matter with her? Is she all right?"

Removing a handkerchief from her pocket, Tilly wrapped it around his sister's right hand. "The acids in the cordite paste have made her

hands raw to the point of blisters. I'm worried about infection, so I'll take her to the clinic."

She turned to his sister, Hannah's eyes wet with tears. "There now, you'll be fine, dear," she said, brushing a hand along her cheek. "The nurse will give you salve and then we'll find you different work until your hands heal."

"B-but what about our football match tomorrow?"

"Well now, it's your hands that are blistered, not your feet." Tilly smiled. "You can still play in the tournament if you feel up to it."

While Hannah's head bobbed up and down, Alex moved aside to let them pass on their way to the clinic. Contentment settled over him seeing them together. Tilly *had* become a part of his family, living in his home where they all spent time together, and there was her obvious love for his sister and brothers and parents.

Perhaps for him, too?

He realized he'd been on edge after Stuart promised to show up and charm his way into Alex's home and Tilly's heart. Even now, Alex rejected the thought of sharing her with the lieutenant, or anyone else for that matter. He'd admitted his defeat—that despite his efforts to distance himself, thoughts of Tilly Lockhart filled his every waking moment. Not only because of his duty to watch over her but also his desire to *be* with her.

In his dreams, he saw her tranquil face and the dreamy-eyed look when she'd first awakened, her arms clinging to him in sleep. And then they danced, sweeping across the room, her warm hand lightly against his shoulder, the softness of her as he held her.

He smiled, reflecting on their pleasant evenings spent out on the porch, with him finding excuses not to chop wood so he could sit with her while she helped his maw with the mending.

They had discussed much—the past with its sorrows, the present with his family, and their dreams for the future. And he'd begun to see a future with Tilly, regardless of her wish to sail across an ocean or his duty to the war.

Would she wait for him? 'Twas a question that crept into his mind more often of late. And each time he tried to push it away, merely weakened his resolve to part with her after his mission. He'd begun to imagine her staying in Gretna with him when peace finally came. Taking her up in his plane. Maybe opening her own dress shop . . .

His smile faded. Had Ian been this love-sick? Yet it might be easier to stop his heart from beating and his lungs from taking in air than to end

his desire for more time with her.

In truth, that meant when Lieutenant Stuart did arrive in Gretna, he must deal with it, because it would mean Rhymer had been found. And above all, Alex intended to protect what was his—Hannah, Tilly, and the rest of his family.

With that in mind, he determined to leave work a few minutes early and return to the post office. It was time to contact Simon and change the way this game was being played.



**OFFICE OF THE ADMIRALTY
WHITEHALL, LONDON**

What do you mean he wants ‘a change of strategy,’ Simon?”

Marcus stood beside the tall bookcase in his office and gazed toward the two men seated near his desk. For an early Saturday morning, his friend already looked a bit done-in as he stretched out in one of the leather chairs.

“Alex believes it would be more expedient to include Tilly Lockhart in the search for Rhymer.”

Marcus scoffed. “A bit like inviting the fox into the henhouse, don’t you think?”

“That’s because we havna told him the full story.” Simon’s coppery brows drew together. “He went to see Stuart on Thursday while you were away and I was with my wife.”

“Congratulations, by the way.” Marcus smiled. “Boy or girl?”

“A lass.” He eased out a grin. “Zoe Louise, after Eve’s sister and mother.”

Marcus nodded. “How are they?”

“Eve’s doing well, despite an exhausting few days. She’s home now with the bairn. Zoe made a bit of an early appearance, but she’s got a good weight and she’s healthy, thank God.”

“Good to hear. Please give them my best.” He sobered. “So Alex went to see Lieutenant Stuart . . . ?”

“Aye. He wanted to learn more about Miss Lockhart and his new orders. Stuart told him she’d worked at Chilwell and could likely identify the saboteur if he’s at Moorside.”

“Clever.”

“To a point.” Simon tipped his head. “When Alex asked him why Miss Lockhart couldna be brought in on the hunt to speed up things,

Stuart told him you were concerned that she'd panic and alert Rhymer to a trap. He said it was better to have her recognize him on her own, and with Alex surveilling her, he could report it."

Marcus grunted. "Not the best logic considering our time frame, but Stuart was caught off guard."

"I told Alex I'd contact him later today with your answer."

Marcus drew a breath and glanced at the silent detective next to Simon. "Quinn, any results from the information I sent you on Wednesday?"

The swarthy detective withdrew a notepad from his inside jacket pocket. "When you said Orly Airfield reported the unsanctioned flight of a Nieuport 11 out of Paris heading across the Channel, we tracked down all British airfields within the plane's fuel range. She didn't land at any of the coastal RAF bases here on the mainland.

"However, we discovered a report at the constabulary in Dover that five days ago a small craft landed in a pasture on Kent Downs. I went to Dover to follow up, and the man who made the complaint takes care of the property while his neighbor is fighting overseas." He scanned his notes. "He reported seeing the plane land and then a truck approach. The pilot and driver both left to walk toward the cliffs near the lighthouse. An hour later they returned, and once the pilot had refueled, both truck and plane took off."

"I've been told Kahverengi's a bit of an aviation enthusiast, and he's got a particular fondness for Nieuports," Marcus said. "How about the driver of the truck?"

Quinn frowned. "The neighbor was some distance away and didn't get a good look. He reported both men as tall and about average weight, but that's all he could say."

Marcus grimaced. "If we go on faith that it *was* Kahverengi this neighbor saw, and the man with him was Rhymer, then in all likelihood they are about to make their move." He glanced sharply at Simon. "How do you think Alex would react knowing he's got our saboteur's sister living in the same house with his family?"

Simon shifted. "I know where this is going, Marcus. You want to continue stalling."

"We're too close now to risk him scaring her off so she can inform her brother."

"What should I tell him then?"

"He's to be patient and keep a sharp eye on who she talks to, especially in the next few days. Tell him we hope to have an update on

Monday.”

“And what if this pilot landing a plane in Kent was just some joyriding hooligan?”

Marcus snarled. “Like I said, we go on faith, because right now that’s all we’ve got.” He glanced at Quinn. “I want you back in the Glasgow office standing by. If Rhymer’s about to make contact, you need to be ready. I’ll notify Stuart as well.”

He glanced at both men. “Believe me, I sympathize with Captain Baird’s frustration. He wants an end to the uncertainty, as do I. And I believe all of us can agree that the sooner Rhymer makes contact with Tilly Lockhart, the better our chances to catch him and save Moorside.”



Julien . . . ?

Heart pounding, Rose sat in her office the following day and reread the latest missive—another poem in a typewritten envelope, much like the one she'd received yesterday, only this time placed prominently on her desktop where she would be certain to find it.

Do not dally, Miss Lockhart, we both know the truth
Your reasons at Gretna and what you must do
Heed my warning this time, and no more escapes
Remember, your gift at the post office awaits.
P. S.

If you value the love and welfare of your clan
You will not cross me or tell of my plan.

Her fingers gripped the note. She had thought the first missive from Millie, but after speaking with her at the end of her shift yesterday, Rose learned the girl had received a hand-delivered telegram earlier in the week with news all women fear. Millie's husband had died as a casualty of war.

The girl hadn't yet sought counsel for her loss, and so Rose spent time offering comfort and referred her to the matron at the hostelry.

So, if not Millie, then who? The menacing note seemed far beyond what even the brashest girl might conjure. And she couldn't imagine Mr. Dobbs creating such lyrical verse.

Heed my warning this time, and no more escapes. It was like Julien had spoken the words directly to her. She'd escaped him once, and then he'd recently shown up at the factory. If anyone, he was most capable of being a menace *and* literary. And the monster had no qualms about being underhanded or committing what amounted to criminal activity—she'd witnessed proof enough of that.

Had Alex told him?

No. Rose had come to admire his straightforwardness. If Alex had doubts, he would have confronted her with them by now. Besides, their time together of late had been idyllic and peaceful, and they'd enjoyed each other's company. He was gentle with her, his smiles warm, and she cherished his laughter and his tender looks. Surely a man couldn't keep up that kind of pretense for long.

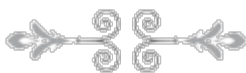
But you have, Rose. She recoiled at the reminder of her own charade . . . and then relaxed. It was true she'd contrived to become Tilly's past, present, and future, yet her attachment to the Bairds, her affection for Alex—no, her *love* for him, making her light up inside when he was near—belonged to Rose Graham.

She glanced at the poem. Julien must have discovered her here by some other means. He could have seen her while she was taking Sarah to the infirmary. But why wait so long to confront her . . . unless he was back?

She shuddered at the possibility. Both poems instructed her to pick up this "gift" at the post office in Gretna. She'd much rather it be some foul prank by Dobbs to get even rather than find Julien lying in wait for her.

Regardless of the sender, the note threatened the welfare of the Bairds, *her clan*, if she didn't follow his instructions. And while she longed to find Alex and show him the messages, that warning weighed heavy on her heart.

Until she knew the sender and how they'd come to place the notes on her desk, she wouldn't jeopardize Alex or his family.



Standing back from Tilly's office out of view, Alex observed her at the desk. She seemed upset by a letter, and when she reached for her throat, he disregarded their conversation of last night and strode toward her office.

"What's wrong, lass?" Her head shot up as he entered, and Alex frowned to see her face pale, the blue eyes dark with anxiety. "'Tis bad news?"

"No . . . I mean, yes, it is bad news, but it does not affect me." She wet her lips, glancing back toward the note. "One of my charges, Millie Parson, she . . . she recently learned that her husband was killed in the war. It is quite distressing."

Alex relaxed his stance. He'd been sure it was some personal loss to her, or a threat, perhaps involving Rhymer and his own assignment to keep her under observation. "I'm sorry to hear it. Is the lass going to be all right?"

"I think so. She's at the hostelry this morning, and she plans to meet our team on the field after lunch when the factory lets out for the championship game." She looked up at the clock. "Which gives me two hours to finish up my work." She turned to him. "Where are you supposed to be right now?"

He straightened. She was about to give him another lecture. "I was passing by the office and saw you in here—"

"Alex." Her eyes narrowed. "I thought we resolved this issue after supper last evening. If you continue in this way, you are going to lose your post. Surely you must have work to do?"

Aye, and the best job there is. He smiled, pleased when the color returned to her face. She fashed about his job at Gretna, and last night she'd actually *instructed* him to pay more attention to his duties at the factory and to stop following her around.

He'd wanted to laugh at her giving him orders, but then he'd seen her careworn expression, eyes troubled just as they were now—and in the end he'd agreed to keep his distance. "I ken what you said to me, lass, and I appreciate your concern, but I have things under control."

"I care about you, Alex. I . . . I don't want anything to happen to you or your family."

Her breathing had quickened, her gaze searching his, and the hair rose along his nape. Was she still speaking of his job . . . or something else? He took in the taut lines against her smooth face. "Are you certain there's nothing more that's fashing you, lass?"

"No . . . though perhaps just the game this afternoon." She looked away, then rose from her chair and came around the desk. "I must check on my girls." Slipping the envelope with the note into her pocket, she looked up at him. "I trust you have things to check on?"

Alex ignored the question, his eyes fixed on her pocket. Was there something else in that letter bothering her? Why did she not tell him? Inspiration struck as he said, "I'm planning to borrow a truck for tomorrow. How about a drive up toward Canonbie? 'Tis only a few miles, and there's a bonny place by the Esk where we can stop and picnic. We'll celebrate today's win against Carlisle, just you and me."

She smiled, though the tension in her expression tore at his heart. "Thank you, Alex, but shouldn't we first wait to see if we win? And

besides, Hannah and I have plans tomorrow.”

“Win or not, we’ll still go to the river. And I’ll have you back in plenty of time for your tea with the lassies.” He reached to lay a hand on her shoulder, so soft beneath his touch. “I’ll wager a quiet hour or two by the water is just what you need,” he said gently.

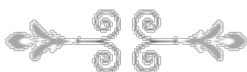
A flicker of hope lit her face, and when she finally nodded, he exulted inside. “It sounds wonderful. Shall we leave after church?”

“Right after.” He grinned. “I’ll ask Maw to pack us a basket. And I’ll bring fishing poles.”

Her eyes teared up suddenly, and he felt her tremble beneath his hand. “I look forward to it, thank you,” she whispered. Too soon she broke contact with him. “I’m sorry, Alex, but I must be on my way. I’ll meet you at Baxter’s Farm for the game later, all right?” She offered a weak smile before rushing past him out of her office.

His chest tightened as he watched her leave. Was it the letter about the poor lass losing her husband that caused her such anguish? Or his work, or even the coming game? None of which satisfied his peace of mind. Tilly had been more than just fashing, she’d been . . . afraid.

Whatever the reason for that fear, he intended to find out.



Pulse racing, Rose stood beside her locker and peeled out of her smock and boots. With the factory’s early shutdown for Summer Sports Day, the changing room was already bustling as dozens of factory girls and older female staff washed and dressed into their street clothes, chattering excitedly about the coming ladies’ football match against the Carlisle Munitionettes. There was also talk of a band and refreshments afterward, with vendor exhibits and Highland dances and singing at the Gretna Community Center.

No doubt the first few trains would be full, taking factory spectators out to Baxter’s Farm, where the match would start in an hour. Which meant she’d have to wait until after the game to visit the Gretna post office.

What kind of “surprise gift” awaited her? All morning, Rose had fretted about it, and even Alex knew something was wrong. Obviously she was being watched. Would she find Dobbs and his laughing cronies waiting for her later when she arrived . . . or Julien, ready to pounce? At this point, the worry had exhausted her, and she longed to end it

and uncover the culprit so she could lose this fear.

Entering the ladies' washroom, she began the ritual of removing the factory toxins while forcing her mind to pleasanter things—like the picnic with Alex tomorrow, perhaps giving her a chance to ease the strain of the past two days over these bizarre poems dogging her every waking moment.

Rose examined her skin as she scrubbed, noting for the first time a slightly sallow hue. Hannah's complexion now wore a dandelion shade from the sulfurs in the cordite paste. Alex's sister had become a true canary girl, which seemed to please her immensely. Rose suspected it was the girl's badge of honor for her important work at HM Factory Gretna.

She was proud of all her young charges. Not only did they excel at football, their courage and hard work were helping to save the lives of thousands of Tommies overseas.

Rose was also anxious for her girls, as the hazardous chemicals they worked with affected them daily. Not only with their skin, gums, hair, and teeth but also the noxious fumes they were constantly forced to inhale. She'd already had to send Dorothy and Gladys to the infirmary to sleep off the drugging effects, and surely no bodily good came from such exposure!

How they could still play football several times a week was a testament to their youth and energy. Though with Jane's cough worsening, would she manage today as their goalie? Twice she'd sent the girl to the clinic, and both times Jane had been returned to the job after receiving a bottle of cough syrup.

Rose towed herself dry and sighed. Peace couldn't arrive soon enough, and she prayed the girls would be able to find safer jobs and still earn a good wage. It was widely viewed now that women's prospects in the workplace had much improved because of the war, and she hoped someday that improvement would extend into Parliament.

Once she'd donned her jersey and cap, she grabbed the whistle and exited the factory, making her way toward the train platform.

She found Alex already there. His green eyes searched hers. "You all right?"

His tender expression made her yearn to share with him her trouble about the notes. Then she remembered the threat and instead compressed her lips and glanced toward the coming train. She wouldn't put him or his family at risk. "Just nerves."

“Dinna fash, Miss Lockhart, those Carlisle lassies dinna stand a chance against us!”

Rose turned to find Hannah, clad in her uniform, stepping onto the platform beside them. The girl had played well, despite her blisters, and the green leather gloves Alex had bought for her now protected her hands, while her agile feet were an asset to the team.

“I have no doubt you will all do your best.” Rose smiled, and for a moment her worry was replaced by another surge of pride.

“I wanted to meet here to tell you I’m going after the truck,” Alex said. “I’ll give you and Hannah a ride to the field.”

“Thank you, Alex.” It would speed up their arrival, giving her girls more time to warm up before the game started.

Twenty minutes later, he pulled in at the farm. “We’ll meet up with you later,” Rose said.

“I’ll be in the stands cheering you lassies to victory.” He smiled, and Rose’s heart gave a thump as she led Hannah to join their team members.

Rose was surprised when Mrs. Nash and Colleen, the team captain, rushed toward her. “We’ve a situation, Miss Lockhart.” Her supervisor’s brows knitted above her hawkish face.

Rose quickly glanced about the crowded stands. Was this about the note? Had Julien arrived and revealed to Mrs. Nash her secret?

“’Tis Jane, Miss Lockhart,” Colleen said, her features concerned. She held a uniform in her hands. “She’s ’ere and brought this uniform, but coughin’ so badly, she can’t stand on ’er feet. We need a new goalie.”

Oh dear! Rose’s relief that it wasn’t about Julien tangled with her new panic to find a goalie replacement. Why hadn’t she considered adding a couple of substitutes for the team? So much for her brilliant coaching. Perhaps one of the other Gretna team’s players?

“There’s no time, Miss Lockhart.” Colleen read her thoughts and held out Jane’s uniform. “Ye must be our goalie this afternoon. Ye know our team plays best, and ye’ve coached us well.”

Rose started to rear back from the girl’s offering. She couldn’t possibly play football in a tournament! Her only experience had been a backyard practice with Alex and the children.

She opened and closed her mouth, unsure of what to say.

“Ye can do this, Miss Lockhart.” Colleen’s eyes implored her. “Just like ye stood up tae that blighter, Dobbs. Ye just protect the goal and we’ll do the rest, all right?”

Still dazed, she found herself nodding and accepting the uniform.

“Come with me,” Mrs. Nash said to her. “There’s a concession booth where you can have privacy to change.”

Minutes later, Rose peeked around the door of the concession at the thousands of noisy spectators in the stands. Then she glanced at her bare knees, and the urge to giggle at defying her uncle’s edicts about a ‘lady’s comportment’ mingled with the terror that Julien—if he’d sent the notes—might be watching her from somewhere in the crowd. Would he recognize her in the Glycerin Girls’ red jersey, khaki shorts, and khaki cap?

“Courage, Rose,” she murmured. Then taking a deep breath, she hurried off to go meet her team on the field. After some quick instruction from Colleen, the coin was tossed, and Rose took her place between the goal posts. Her pulse pounded as the referee’s loud whistle blared for the kick-off, and Colleen shouted to her players, “This is for the win, Glycerin Girls!”



Congratulations, Team Gretna!”

Alex stood beaming at the foot of the dais two hours later while an exhausted Rose and her players descended the steps. They’d just accepted the Challenge Cup from the football Master of Ceremonies. “That was a braw match against Carlisle, and you lassies deserved the win!”

Rose chuckled as her feet returned to the grassy field, her mood still aglow after their victory. “It would be fairer to say these girls of mine deserve the Cup, though it is sweet of you to include me, Alex.”

It was true; Rose had asked for a miracle, and in her view, God had seen fit to give her girls superhuman ability, as she’d never before seen them play so well or so defensively. And they’d done it in order to keep the other team from scoring inside her goal as much as possible.

“Miss Lockhart, ye did block three balls on yer own, and that made the difference in the final score,” Colleen said, grinning to expose her missing teeth as she held the Cup in her arms.

Mrs. Nash, who had represented the factory’s day shift for the award, followed them down from the dais. “I knew all along I’d made the right choice in you for coaching the team, Miss Lockhart,” she said, smiling.

“Aye, she saved the day!” Gladys cried, and the rest of the girls cheered her words.

Still euphoric, Rose laughed. Admittedly, she’d held her own in the game considering her inexperience, though to her credit she’d coached enough and observed enough in the past few weeks to understand her duties as goalie. She’d also secretly accomplished her dream of actually being in the game, like the girls she’d watched play long ago at Chilwell’s field.

“Are any of you coming over to the Community Center later?” Mrs. Nash asked.

The girls eyed each other, most of them looking done-in after playing

football for nearly two hours. "For my part, I plan to go and change and then get a good night's sleep," Rose said, and she was surprised when Hannah nodded her agreement. The girl must be near collapse to refuse the chance to be social with her friends.

It turned out, however, that almost all her charges made the same decision, except for the girls from the niter stores. After saying her good-byes, Mrs. Nash struck out across the field toward the center and the rest of the festivities.

"I'll just go change." Rose turned toward the concession where she'd left her clothes.

"We'll wait for you in the truck," Alex said.

Her ebullient mood suddenly crashed remembering what she still must do. "No need . . . I'll take the train back to Gretna." She forced a smile. "I have an errand first." Instinctively she looked to the emptying stands, scanning the faces there. Was she being watched?

"I can make a stop if you like," Alex said.

He was frowning at her now. Rose hesitated. "I . . . I must go to Timber Town to look in on Jane."

"Shall I come with you?" Hannah's amber eyes lit with compassion.

"That is sweet of you, dear, but I will not be long, and Jane needs her rest. Hopefully she'll feel well enough to join us for the tea tomorrow."

Alex eyed her another moment. "We'll see you at the cottage then."

"Hannah!"

The rest of the Glycerin Girls were walking toward the train platform. "Come on!" Betty and Gladys shouted, and Hannah turned, giving her brother a pleading look.

"Alex, I'll ride back on the train with my teammates, if that's all right. I'll see you at home?"

He nodded and then took off toward the truck. Rose released her pent-up breath. Being with him tempted her to reveal her predicament, but she must take care of this herself.

Quickly she made her way to the concession. Once more clad in her blouse and skirt, she carried her bundle of uniforms and went to the train platform.

She was relieved to discover Hannah and the other girls had already departed, and she waited with some of the spectators for the next train, keeping her eyes on the faces of those who joined the throng. When, minutes later, Rose had boarded along with the others, she sat alone toward the back, hands fisted in her lap as she imagined what might

await her at the post office.

At the Gretna station, she disembarked with the crowd and started for Timber Town, glancing behind her for any signs of Hannah or the other girls.

When she was assured they'd all gone home, she changed direction from the huts and headed instead toward town. Staying close to the shoulder with the other workers while lorries, motorcars, and horse-drawn carts milled back and forth in the streets, Rose continually scanned the masses for a glimpse of anyone who might be watching her.

At the post office, several people were already inside. She surveyed every corner of the lobby as she entered, seeking assurance that the enemy—either Julien or Dobbs—was nowhere to be found.

The older man behind the counter had kind eyes above his white mustache. "I believe you have a . . . package for Tilly Lockhart?"

He shuffled toward a maze of cubbyholes at the back and returned with a rather small box wrapped in brown paper. "Here you go, Miss Lockhart."

"Thank you—" she looked up to see the postmaster's nameplate on the wall—"Mr. Wylie."

"You're most welcome, lass. And I hear Gretna won the match against Carlisle." He eyed the bundled uniforms under her arm. "Congratulations!"

She smiled, and then after leaving the building, she paused to carefully wrap the package inside her cloth bundle before heading toward home. As the workers thinned the farther she walked, Rose glanced behind her every so often, her skin tingling with a sense she wasn't alone.

Jittery nerves! She took a deep breath and tried to force calm, grateful she hadn't run into either one of her nemeses. The package seemed ordinary enough too, though she'd wait until later to open it in her room. Perhaps she'd find a note inside with the sender's name.

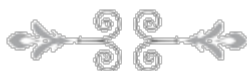
The package had piqued her curiosity by the time she reached the long drive to the Baird home. The lorry sat in front of the cottage, but she was still far enough away that she stopped and cast a furtive look around her before peeling back the uniform cloth to get to the box.

"Miss Lockhart!" Hannah hailed her from the house and began running in her direction. "Supper's almost ready," she said breathlessly when she arrived. "Maw sent me to look for Alex. Have you seen him?"

Rose shook her head, her grip once again tight on the bundle as she

darted another look around her. “His lorry is there.”

“Aye, but I canna find him.”



Alex stood behind a pair of leafy birches only yards away and mouthed a silent oath. Leave it to his sister's timing.

Once the two started back down the drive, he retraced his steps, taking the path toward Blood Pond and the neighbor's pasture, then cutting back toward the small wooded area just behind the house. He ran the distance, determined to get there ahead of Tilly and keep his surveillance a secret.

He'd driven by the Gretna platform in time to see her leave the second train with several other workers. Carrying a bundle of red cloth, likely her team uniform, she moved in the direction of Timber Town, he assumed, to go see the lass who had taken ill just before the match. Alex thought to simply head the truck toward home.

Then he'd almost missed it—Tilly, giving a backward glance toward the platform before she surprised him by avoiding the hostels altogether and taking the other direction into town.

He'd slowed the truck, following at a distance, hoping to blend in with the other road traffic as her gaze darted everywhere. She was definitely nervous about something.

She'd gone into the post office and come out again with a small parcel, hiding the box inside the cloth bundle, much the way he'd done with Hannah's gloves inside his coat.

Who had sent her the package? And was this the reason she'd been upset? Tilly was an orphan without family, and those dearest to her had died in Nottingham. Was it just a catalog order? If so, then why hide it?

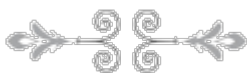
As soon as she'd started back toward the crossroads, he turned the truck around and beat her to the cottage. Taking the path behind the woods, he'd worked his way to the main road on foot to keep an eye on her—a difficult task since she had turned around at least a dozen times.

Was she afraid . . . or was she hiding something? How could that package be so personal that she didn't open it and worried someone else might take notice?

The fact she'd lied to them about where she was going disturbed him most of all. Tilly had lied *to him*. And she was as jittery as a sheep

before shearing. Why?

Alex burst into the backyard, breathless and relieved to see he'd left the ax embedded in the stump. Quickly he unbuttoned his shirt and rolled up his sleeves before grabbing up the blade to start hacking.



Rose had reached the front door with Hannah when the sounds of chopping wood reached her ears. The tightness in her shoulders eased. "He's in back."

"Och, I thought I checked, but I didna see him."

"Perhaps he was in the shed?"

The girl shrugged, but Rose felt relieved that her constant fear of being followed home was unfounded.

As they entered the house, the delicious smells coming from the kitchen made her stomach rumble. "I'll just put this uniform away and help you and your mother lay out the food."

Tucking the package beneath her pillow, Rose returned to see that Hannah was already setting the table. Mrs. Baird appeared from the kitchen. "Hannah, lass, go and fetch Fergus and James. They're in their room with the dog and that smelly stocking ball, so be sure they wash their hands." She smiled at Rose. "Congratulations on winning against Carlisle, lass! Mr. Baird and I are so proud of the team and yer fine coaching!"

Warmed by the praise, Rose ducked her head. "Thank you, I'm delighted for the girls."

"Not just them," Mrs. Baird corrected. "I ken that ye were a key to helping the lassies win today." When her face suffused with more heat, Mrs. Baird took pity on her. "Och, ye'll turn into a beet if I go on. Please go call Alex in from the back, and I'll get Mr. Baird so we can all sit down to eat."

Relieved, Rose stepped out onto to the back porch just as Alex collided with her. Sweat beaded along his throat where he'd left a shirt button undone, and she caught the faint spice of his cologne. "Supper is ready."

"Aye," he said, clearly out of breath as he tunneled his fingers through the damp, chestnut locks. "How was your visit to see the young lass? Jane?"

Rose's voice faltered beneath his piercing gaze. "She . . . was asleep

when I arrived. I had no wish to disturb her, so I'll go back and check on her tomorrow before the tea."

"I see." His lower lip curled. "At least you *made the effort*."

Was it his look or the way he'd emphasized the words that made her cringe with guilt? "Shall we go inside?" Quickly she turned to reenter the house, eager to escape his scrutiny.

Supper was no better, however, as he continued staring at her, his expression brooding. Rose was relieved when the meal finally ended, and she stood as Mrs. Baird began clearing dishes. "I'll help you with that."

"The lads and I can take care of cleaning up." Mrs. Baird appraised her and then glanced at her eldest son. "Ye both look a bit haggard tonight, poor lambs. Go have a seat in the parlor and I'll bring tea."

"I am a bit tired," Rose admitted, seeing her escape. "I think I'll retire early tonight. I will see you all in the morning." She glanced around the table, her eyes darting past Alex. "Good night."

Upon reaching her room, Rose found Winston had nudged the door open and now lay inside on the rug, stocking ball in his mouth as he whipped his head back and forth, killing the wild beast.

She closed the door behind her and went to sit on the bed. Removing the package from beneath her pillow, she laid it on her lap and stared at the brown paper. Her pulse leapt to notice the postal stamp from London. Julien . . . ?

She tugged at the string, loosened the paper, and immediately the faint scent of roses reached her nose. Tearing off the wrapping, she let it fall to the floor and drew a sharp breath. The red box with French gold lettering—exactly like the one in Tilly's locker.

Rose spied the note then, tied to the box with string. She removed it and began to read:

Carry these two scented gems if you dare
On the first day into the factory with care
And just as before, wear your thistle for me,
The cotton stores at noon and I'll take them from thee.

P. S.

This mission is everything to us, sister. I'm counting on you.

—Rhymer

Sister. Rose gripped the missive. Who was Rhymer? And why had he sent her this package? Dropping the note, she opened the red box to find two small perfume canisters. Again the powerful fragrance assailed

her—the very same scent in Tilly’s red box. Rose had thought the perfume a surprise for her party, a showing of the gifts.

She observed the brand. Dralle’s *Illusion* perfume. Aunt Delia wore Dralle’s in lilac scent. The perfume was quite costly. How could Tilly afford such an extravagance? Or had it been a gift from this Rhymer?

Her hands shook as she opened the first tiny canister. No vial of perfume but instead a small, oblong-shaped device similar in looks to the shortened stub of a pencil.

The second canister held the same.

She picked up the note and again considered the poem. *Just as before . . . into the factory with care.* Had Tilly received similar devices in the red box in her locker? Had she planned to carry them inside the factory to this Rhymer person?

Her friend would have been searched for any contraband each time she entered the factory. Rose couldn’t imagine why Tilly would risk her job, unless . . .

Had she been threatened in this same way at Chilwell?

Wear your thistle. Rose eyed the jeweled pin on her nightstand. Tilly wore the thistle brooch on Rose’s last day of work. *On their last day.* She’d said it was her mother’s, having hidden the pin in her hair to get it inside the factory.

This mission is everything to us, sister. A shiver rippled through her as the word *sister* took on new clarity. Rhymer was claiming to be Tilly’s brother? Her friend spoke of a brother only once and rather abruptly, just to say that he’d died somewhere overseas. Rose imagined the memory too painful to discuss, so she’d not pursued it.

But what if he *was* alive? Had he met with Tilly? Had he sent her this same perfume box and convinced her to take these devices into the factory?

She gazed at the tiny canisters. What had her dear friend been about that night? And why would Tilly’s brother need these odd devices brought to him? Though his not-so-subtle threats gave Rose a sense of foreboding.

Tilly had seemed unusually pale that last day, and Rose assumed it was because she weakened from the TNT poisoning. And her friend’s melancholy had been due to the fact they would soon be parted from each other . . . or was it something else? *I’ve just a final task to finish . . .*

Rose hugged herself. What should she do? Rhymer had threatened her with the Baird family’s welfare if she didn’t cooperate; yet if she did manage to slip the devices into the factory *without* getting caught,

what was their purpose?

She should take these canisters to the authorities. But Rhymer seemed to know her every move. Would he then harm Alex and his family before anyone discovered him? And if she involved the police, it would certainly bring to light her own secret.

How was she to resolve this *and* protect herself and the family she'd come to love?

Closing her eyes, Rose rubbed at her temples. Her physical exhaustion had combined with tension and mental fatigue. If she could only crawl into bed, she would be able to sort this all in the morning.

Replacing the canisters with the devices inside the red box, she leaned to retrieve the paper from the floor—and found Winston chewing on it. “No, Winston! Bad dog!”

Rose managed to salvage the soggy paper from his mouth and rewrapped the box, tucking the note beneath the tied string. Setting the package on the bed, she changed into her nightgown, and after completing her ablutions at the washstand she slipped beneath the covers. When Winston hopped up to lie against her, she took the parcel and slid it under the bed.

Tomorrow. *Lord, please help me to figure a way out of this.*

Yet despite her prayer and her weariness, she tossed and turned into the small hours, finally drifting off into a fitful sleep near dawn, stirring only once at Winston's low growl.



It seemed she'd been asleep just minutes when Winston's barking awakened her.

"Hush," Rose grumbled. But his yipping continued, and she opened her eyes to stare at the plaid coverlet. He was gone.

Sitting up, she squinted against the light from the window and listened.

His barking persisted somewhere in the house.

"Daft dog." Throwing off the covers, she swung her feet onto the floor. She donned her robe and slippers and stumbled from her room toward the excited barking. "Hush, Winston!" she called in a loud whisper, moving through the hall.

Rose finally entered the parlor—and went perfectly still.

Alex sat on the couch with the perfume canisters in his hand. His other held the now damp, tattered note from Rhymer.

The red box and brown paper wrapping lay at his feet, soggy and chewed to pieces, while Winston kept lunging back and forth, barking and jumping up to nip the paper Alex held beyond his reach.

"Winston, hush!" Rose ran to grab him. "You'll wake everyone!"

"They've already gone to church."

What? She glanced at the mantel clock. Nine o'clock. She'd overslept . . .

Her breath caught as Alex began opening one of the canisters and removed the small pencil device. "What were you planning to do with this, Tilly?"

He lifted his face to her, and Rose quailed at his fierce look. "I . . . I don't know, Alex."

He rose from the couch and swiftly closed the distance between them. Looming over her, his eyes blazed like some wild Celt warrior as he held up the tattered note. "How do you know Rhymer?"

His deep voice vibrated with fury. Rose had never seen him like this

before. "I . . . I've never met him . . ."

"I'll ask one more time." He thrust both canisters toward her. "What were you planning to do with these explosives?"

"Explosives?" Staring wide-eyed, she began to tremble. *Chilwell*. Fragments of memories flashed in her mind: the acrid black smoke, bloody debris raining from the sky . . .

"Answer me!" His angry voice jarred her. "Did you plan to sabotage the factory and kill innocent workers, *including my sister*? Do you wish to harm my family when they've been so good to you?"

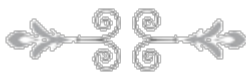
How could he believe such a terrible thing? Her eyes welled with tears. "That is absurd! Of course I would never hurt them!" She wavered on her feet, struck by the full gravity of her situation. Rhymer wanted *her* to help him blow up the factory.

Had Tilly done the same at Chilwell that terrible night?

She tried to imagine an explosion of the same magnitude in a facility the size of HM Factory Gretna. The destruction would kill or injure hundreds, maybe thousands of workers, with the damage extending to the townships of Gretna, Easttriggs—even this cottage!

She had to tell him the truth about everything, no matter the consequences. "Please, wait here. I want to show you something."

Rushing back to her room, she returned moments later and offered him the two other notes from Rhymer. "He sent me these on Friday and Saturday," she explained as he scanned the poems. "I thought the first was a prank from one of the girls, but when he sent the second one yesterday, I had to go to the post office to pick up the package. He . . . he threatened your family, and I couldn't let him harm you."



Alex read the words through his rage—*Rhymer's words*—and only half listened to her blethering. The devil had referred to her as his "sister" in the note the dog was chewing this morning beside her bed.

Restless last night, he'd lain in bed wondering why she'd lied to him and hidden the package that seemed to have her so on edge. As sleep continued to elude him, his family awoke shortly after dawn and he made his excuses to miss church. After they left, he rose and slipped into Tilly's room, where he found Winston sprawled on the rug.

The dog had stood and let out a low growl, and Alex halted—then spied the package on the rug beneath him, the paper wet and torn. He

made to grab for it just as Winston snatched up the box and shot out the open door into the hall.

Tilly barely stirred, and Alex had been grateful she was such a sound sleeper. He'd left the room and entered the parlor to find Winston in Da's chair, chewing on the paper—and then barking his head off when Alex took away his prize.

Now his "sleeping angel" stood telling him more lies, while in her possession were letters from the saboteur he'd been sent to find—*her brother*—along with what appeared to be some kind of explosives Rhymer intended to use to blow up Moorside.

Of course she would deny knowing anything and try to save her own hide.

"Go and get dressed," he barked, and when she jumped, an ache pierced through his anger.

"Wait! Alex, I haven't been entirely truthful with you." Her voice shook. "I am not who you think I am—"

"And you must think me a dunderhead not to ken that fact?" Hurt filled him as he glared at her. "You come into *my* home and gain the trust of *my* family, when all the while you've planned sabotage against those I love?"

"B-but I'm trying to tell you, I am not Tilly Lockhart. My name is Rose Gr—"

"What, some alias you think will satisfy me into letting you go?" His mind filled with an image of his brother and the photo of the woman who destroyed him. "I already ken that you're a spy, so you can save your lies for Scotland Yard. Now get dressed."

"You're taking me to the police?" Her large blue eyes widened like moons, the ivory skin paler than he'd ever seen.

"Aye, now go!" He gave her his most intimidating look. "Or do you want some help?"

"No! I'll . . . be just a few minutes." She turned and darted back to her room.

He stared after her, then at the notes and perfume canisters in his hands. Fury and self-reproach threatened to suffocate him while his heart felt rent in two.

Love had done this to him, made him a fool for believing Tilly, or Rose, or whatever name she wished to offer—it didna matter, as she'd used him as a means to an end.

What an actress! Calculating this scheme from the moment she arrived in Gretna. When Simon first sent him the telegram to watch

her, Alex had considered and then discarded the notion that she took advantage of his family in order to hide here and maintain her privacy outside of work, even as an alibi should she need it.

It sickened him now to realize he'd been right.

Had his best friend and Weatherford known all along she was Rhymer's sister?

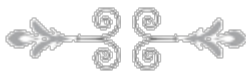
The betrayal stung. They'd blinded him to the truth, allowing him to believe her innocent, merely an eyewitness they hoped would recognize Rhymer from Chilwell. Not evil, like the woman who had cast her spell on Ian, weaving seduction and vice around his heart until he'd brought dishonor upon his family and nation. Alex was beginning to ken what it felt like . . .

"I-I'm ready."

Tilly had reappeared, dressed in her pink frock and eyeing him anxiously.

"Let's go." He'd take her to East Fortune and meet with Stuart, and since it was Sunday, Rhymer wouldna be the wiser if he *was* watching them. Alex had already intended to take Tilly on a picnic.

Fool. He gritted his teeth at the reminder while his pain and anger continued to do battle. Leaving his family a brief note, he ushered her out to the truck.



Rose sat stiffly on the cab's bench seat as Alex drove them east. While she had no idea as to which constabulary he intended to take her, she wasn't eager to engage him in conversation.

Never had she seen him so angry, and certainly not at her. Even when he first arrived in the small hours and she attacked him with his golf club thinking he was a thief, he'd been more exasperated with her than incensed.

"What did your brother mean when he wrote 'Just as before, into the factory with care . . .'?" He glanced at her, his rough features taut. "Did you take the same devices into Chilwell when you worked there?"

Rose crossed her arms, ignoring him as she looked straight ahead. She'd actually tried to tell him the truth, knowing his relationship with Julien and putting Duggie and Samuel at risk.

Yet Alex didn't believe her.

Let him stew! Perhaps once they arrived at the authorities, she could

tell *them* the truth about her quandary, including the illicit transaction she'd witnessed between her uncle and Julien—provided they promised to safeguard her little brothers.

Alex's question nonetheless disturbed her, resurrecting her doubts about Tilly. Had her friend played a part in Chilwell's destruction and the explosion causing her death?

No. Rose stared out her window. Tilly was not capable of committing cold-blooded murder. Yes, the scent of the perfume and the box had been in her locker, but it didn't prove she'd actually taken the devices inside the factory. *Unless her brother had threatened her with something terrible.*

"Do you wish to go to prison, Miss Lockhart?"

Rose jerked her head toward Alex, his cutting tone making her chest ache. His cold manner reminded her of Julien. But Alex wasn't anything like him! She yearned again for his gentle words and his tender looks. The hearty laughter and lopsided grins that made her melt inside.

Those were gone, however, and Rose again felt trapped. How could she extricate herself from this nightmare without doing someone harm—her brothers, the Bairds, or the innocent workers at the factory? "I will not go to prison, Alex," she said stubbornly. "I've done nothing wrong. I am not who you think I am, nor did I ask to receive that package. I have never seen those devices before."

"But you know Rhymer." He glanced at her, his gaze intense. "He's your brother."

"He is not my brother." Rose turned back to the window. It seemed pointless arguing with him. She could only hope for help from the police.



By the time they arrived at RAF East Fortune, Alex had grown weary of questioning her. When he'd asked about the details to sabotage Gretna, either she refused to answer him, or when she did, her response was always the same. She wasna Tilly Lockhart, she was innocent, Rhymer was a stranger to her, and she had no idea what he intended.

Pulling up in front of the airfield headquarters, he exited the truck and came around to collect her, taking her inside the green cinder-block building.

Donovan sat in the first office, manning the communications. "Captain Baird!" The cadet launched from his seat to stand at attention.

"Cadet, have you seen Lieutenant Stuart?" he demanded.

Donovan darted a sidelong glance. "I . . . no, sir. Colonel gave him a few days of furlough. I think he went back tae London."

Did the lieutenant ever do his job here? Blowing air through his nostrils, Alex considered his next course of action. Time was short. He told Tilly the devices were explosives, but having never seen their like before, he'd only been guessing.

Still, he wasna about to take chances. He'd contact either Simon or Weatherford at the Admiralty. "I need to send a telegram immediately."

"Aye, Captain!" Donovan thrust his shoulders back another inch.

Alex turned to size up his prisoner. "Have you got a secure room?"

"Uh . . ." Donovan gave him a bemused look. "The supply room, sir?"

"That'll work."

Donovan grabbed a key from the desk and led the way beyond Colonel Landon's office to a door across the hall. "Here, sir." He handed Alex the key.

"Thanks, Cadet. I'll be with you shortly."

“Aye, sir!” Again the young pilot-in-training straightened before beating feet back to the communications room.

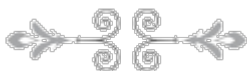
As he opened the door, Tilly’s eyes widened. “Why do you need . . . ?”

He quickly nudged her inside. “Stay put.”

Before she could turn around and argue with him, Alex closed and secured the door.

Now to contact Weatherford, and this time no more games.

Alex had their “possible key” locked up tight.



“Let me out!” Rose banged on the door inside the supply room. A slice of daylight from the tiny window cast shadows on a variety of mops, brooms, buckets, rags, and beeswax.

She couldn’t believe he’d locked her in here. It happened so fast, she didn’t realize his intent until it was too late. “Alex, don’t treat me like a prisoner!”

“You are a prisoner.”

She jumped to hear his muffled voice on the other side of the door. “Please, Alex. I’m telling you the truth.”

“You’ll stay there until the authorities arrive.”

“I won’t!” she cried. “You have no right. I am innocent.”

“We’ll leave that for Scotland Yard to decide.”

Panic gripped her as she pressed her fists against the door. Earlier, she’d decided to tell the authorities everything if they would agree to protect Douglas and Samuel. Now, however, the reality that she’d soon reveal her secret to the police unraveled her. Uncle Ridley was powerful, while Julien was the son of an earl. What if Scotland Yard refused to help her brothers?

She picked her way through the brooms, dustbins, and boxes to take a seat on an overturned mop bucket. Angry despair overwhelmed her. Alex hadn’t believed the truth when she’d told him, and he still thought she’d planned to conspire with Rhymer.

You can hardly blame him. Her gaze dropped to the floor. She’d thought this was her chance; God’s rescue after what she’d witnessed in the library, and the threats against her brothers if she didn’t go through with a horrible marriage. Her means to freedom and having the choice to make a better life for her and the boys.

Rose also agonized to think that soon Mr. and Mrs. Baird would know her for a fraud, while Alex triumphed in his vindication. And Hannah . . . what kind of role model could she possibly be to the girl and the rest of her charges at the factory once they knew she'd been living a lie?

Oh, Tilly, what really happened? She and Rose had only known each other a few months, but in that time they'd become like sisters. And that sister made sure Rose left the factory before she did, shooing her out of the building, offering her own chain necklace . . .

Rose sighed and scrubbed her face with her hands. There was so much she didn't understand about any of this—except that her determination to avoid an arranged marriage had placed her in the middle of some deadly intrigue!

“Fetch Captain Baird from the hangar. I've got a telegram.”

Rose stood and picked her way back toward the door. That voice—Donovan, the cadet whom they'd met on their arrival. Her pulse pounded at her throat. Had Alex received word from the authorities already?

The key turned in the lock minutes later, and Rose stepped back as her jailor opened the door. “A detective from Scotland Yard is en route from Glasgow. He'll arrive in two hours to take you into custody.”

Alex spoke in a rough voice, his bronzed features stony as he gazed at her.

Rose reached for the wall beside the door. This bad dream was becoming all too real . . . Her knees gave out then and she started to collapse toward the floor. Alex reached for her, holding her waist, and for a precious moment concern replaced his animosity.

She remembered other, similar intimacies with him, his gentleness as he'd held her and danced with her across the floor, careful to avoid her bare feet. And in the cab after their castle holiday, his tenderness as he'd held her, waiting while she tried to stand after waking to find herself wrapped around him.

His concern now faded toward bitterness, and pride made her gather her strength to stand on her own. She pulled away from him. “So I am to be your prisoner then, locked in this room for the next two hours?” She raised her chin, pursing her lips to keep them from trembling.

“You're a traitor to Britain.” He leaned in, his face inches from hers, the words cutting her like the ax he so expertly wielded. “And I can only pray that you get a prison sentence instead of a firing squad.”

Dizziness assailed her. “I . . . I've done nothing wrong.” She struggled

against full-blown panic. "Alex, you must believe me!"

But he turned on his heel and left her, closing the door behind him. She stood in stunned silence, until the click of the lock signaled her continued incarceration. At his receding footsteps, she slumped back onto the mop bucket and buried her face in her hands. *Lord, what should I have done? Remain in Leicester trapped in misery and suffering? Or here now to either face death for someone else's treachery or risk the truth with the authorities and endanger my brothers' lives?*

Rose wasn't aware of how long she sat there when again the click of the lock drew her attention. Her mouth went dry. Would her executioner appear in the doorway?

She was surprised to see a policewoman standing on the threshold. "You're to come with me, miss." The older woman's brusqueness held no animosity as she indicated Rose should follow her.

"Where are we going?" she asked hoarsely.

"To the ladies'." The officer eyed her a moment before her tone softened. "The captain sent for me from Edinburgh. To see to your . . . comforts, miss."

Rose's fear eased somewhat as she allowed the policewoman to lead her to the washroom. Afterward, she was directed to an office along the opposite wall near her prison. The plate on the door read, *Lt. Colonel N. Landon, Commandant*.

Alarmed, she glanced at the policewoman as she opened the door. "You may go inside, miss."

Rose drew a deep breath as she entered . . . and paused at the array of food laid out on the colonel's desk.

Alex rose from behind the desk. "Have a seat."

He waved her toward the empty chair across from him and retook his own. As she'd had no breakfast, Rose eagerly moved toward the food, but her appetite died when he called to the policewoman, "Constable Edwards, please remain at the door."

She was still a prisoner then. Taking her seat, she observed Alex had already filled his plate. Rose eyed the tray, her stomach churning. How could she possibly eat now?

"At least have a wee bite. You havna eaten since last night."

She glanced up at him, then selected a few breakfast foods and put them on a plate.

Abruptly he pushed back from the makeshift table and crossed his arms. "All right, I'm ready to hear what you've got to say for yourself."

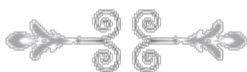
With her comforts now seen to, and being able to sit in the

commandant's office instead of the supply closet, Rose's stubbornness returned. After all, she'd done nothing worthy of prison, though it would be "Tilly" they wished to incarcerate. But her friend was dead, and even if she wasn't, Rose refused to believe her capable of such a heinous crime.

What's more, Alex hadn't given her a clue about what was going on. He seemed familiar with Rhymer but said nothing other than to threaten her with prison and a firing squad.

Her pain rekindled at this last. Once again he'd judged her, making assumptions and accusations when she'd tried to be truthful with him—albeit having done so only this morning and not weeks ago.

And if she repeated what she'd already told him, would he believe her? At the moment, Alex seemed bent on convicting her and passing sentence. "I've decided to take your advice, *Captain*." She tilted her chin to meet his gaze. "And save my explanations for Scotland Yard."



Alex stared at her across the desk, his simmering ire now at odds with the realization she hadna pretended to further sway him to her cause or to be coy.

Her anger at him was genuine.

Grudgingly, he admired her courage in standing up to him, much the way she had with Dobbs. Though since being fed and seated in a comfortable chair instead of her temporary jail, her prickly nature had returned.

If their circumstances were not so dire, he might have been amused. But the pain of her deception, and now the uncertainty of what to believe from her, cut him deeply. He might not have been led to treason as his brother was, but unknowingly he'd come dangerously close to being taken in.

Yet even as his mind set its course, he couldna let go of the memory of her vulnerability the night of their first meeting, or the trust he'd seen in those sleepy eyes as she'd awakened that Sunday night in his truck. Not the look of a murderess spy.

He thought of their talks together, the pining in her voice when she spoke of her family. Her fond memories of life in Glasgow and her yearning expression as she watched his own family share their affections. She'd seemed terribly lonely at times, as if she were the only

person on earth and could rely on no one else. And Alex had found himself wanting to be that one person she could count on.

He expelled a sigh. His heart would get him into trouble if he wasn't careful. He could easier empathize now with his brother. And it had cost Ian his life.

Weatherford's reply to his telegram was adamant. *Do not let her out of your sight.* Anticipating every possibility of her escape, the captain had also arranged to have Scotland Yard send over the policewoman from Edinburgh.

Alex couldn't let emotion outweigh the facts. Tilly was in possession of potential explosives, and she had communications from Rhymer. She'd also denied the devil was her brother. Was that another lie?

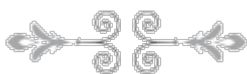
And how would his family take the news? If *he* was miserable, his maw and da would be devastated, as would Hannah, who believed the sun rose and set on Miss Lockhart, *if* that was her real name.

Alex eyed her angrily. "Tell me this—how can you live with yourself and your actions? Your lies to my parents, to Hannah, and the lassies at work?"

She looked up from sipping her cup of tea, weariness in her expression. "I never did it to hurt them, Alex. All I ever wanted was the freedom to choose my own life."

What did she mean by that? "Has Rhymer made any other threats against you?"

She shook her head, the large blue eyes sad. "No, *he* hasn't."



Listless, Rose sat back in her chair. Alex looked as though he could barely stand the sight of her. "How much longer until this detective arrives?" she asked quietly.

"Anytime now."

She sighed. Soon enough her veneer as Tilly Lockhart *would* be stripped away and her innocence with regard to Rhymer vindicated. Yet Rose would pay the bigger price—hailed back to Leicester by Luther or someone else, with the wedding to Julien rescheduled.

Treason or marriage, her prison sentence would be the same, though perhaps not the firing squad. Still, Julien was capable of providing worse torments.

"Captain Baird, Detective Quinn of Scotland Yard has arrived. He is

waiting in the communications office.”

Rose turned to see a tall, lean older man in uniform standing on the open threshold.

“Thank you, Colonel.” Alex rose from his seat at the desk while the colonel looked at her with kindly curiosity before disappearing back down the hall.

Her insides did somersaults as Alex stood over her, sadness in his eyes. His tone softened. “Is there anything else you want to tell me, lass? Before I bring him in?”

Shaking her head, she held back a sob. Her truth to the detective would come out soon enough. Though Rose intended to fight to save her brothers.

He strode from the office, and she heard him give orders to the policewoman as he closed the door.

Minutes passed as she sat with hands clenched in her lap, staring at the door. How would she begin to explain the sequence of events that took place the fateful night after Chilwell exploded? And would the detective believe her story? The only way to prove who she *really* was meant contacting her uncle . . .

The door cracked open, and she jerked in the seat, her heart pounding furiously.

Alex walked in first and strode across the room to stand beside her. The man who followed wore a black bowler hat and was tall and solidly built. He moved to close the door behind him, and Rose shot to her feet, her whole body trembling. She bent her head, unable to look at her executioner directly and instead let her gaze travel up his length—taking in the sable trousers and matching jacket, the dark hair slicked to a shine beneath the hat . . .

He turned and went completely still, staring at her. “Miss . . . Graham?”

The room seemed to shift. Rose grabbed for the back of her chair. “Luther?”



What was her uncle's chauffeur doing here?

Luther quickly regained his composure. "When did you come back from the dead?" He glanced at Alex, then frowned at her. "And what game are you playing?"

From the corner of her eye, Rose saw Alex stiffen in shock, yet she was too afraid now to crow over the fact. "How did you find me?" Her voice trembled. "Did Uncle Ridley send you?"

A sudden light came into his dark eyes, and his mouth curved upward. It was the first time Rose had ever seen him smile. "I think I know." He tipped his head. "Did you by chance acquaint yourself with a clockmaker in Glasgow a few weeks ago?"

His question made her pause. She nodded. "We . . . we did not get on well at all."

"The Glasgow police recently arrested Clive Liddle, who was charged with several counts of forgery. When I interrogated him at the station about Tilly Lockhart, he confessed to knowing her but said a woman similar in looks had come to see him weeks ago, pretending to be Tilly, and to get new identity papers." He paused. "That was you."

Interrogation? Glasgow police? "Are you no longer working for my uncle?"

Again, he looked toward Alex, then shook his head. "I'm Detective Quinn with a division of Scotland Yard."

Rose struggled to grasp his words. "How . . . do you know Tilly?"

"I was about to ask the same question." Alex spoke up beside her. "What's going on here, Quinn?"

"I was Tilly Lockhart's contact at Chilwell. She was working for us."

"So you knew she was Rhymer's sister? And Captain Weatherford . . ."

Quinn nodded. "The captain brokered the deal with her to help us catch Rhymer."

Rose heard Alex snarl under his breath. Detective Quinn narrowed his gaze on her. "Tell me, Miss Graham, where is she?"

Tilly . . . working for Scotland Yard? And who was Captain Weatherford? Still dazed, she waved a shaky hand toward one of the chairs against the wall, then turned to Alex. "You had both better sit down."

Once the men took their seats, Rose angled her chair to face them. She was conscious of Alex's eyes on her as she haltingly began to explain, starting with the note and how Tilly had urged her to write to Luth—Detective Quinn, so that she could have her bridal party.

She finished with the explosion, and discovering the brooch, and realizing Tilly's death was her only chance to escape an awful marriage and seek a new life. "But now I seem to find myself in some terrible trouble," she said, glancing at Alex.

Detective Quinn's leathery features were a mix of shock, grief, and wonder. "Tilly sent me her own note that evening, along with your message. I received both only minutes before the blast. Her note said she would soon have her freedom."

His smile wavered, the dark eyes filled with pain. "She'd received instructions from Rhymer several days before, much like the notes you received and which Captain Baird has turned over to me. That last day, she was to wear the brooch and meet her brother at the Mixing House with the explosives at the end of the shift."

"Those stubby-looking devices that were inside the perfume canisters?"

He nodded. "They're called pencil bombs—they're timed explosives."

"Timed explosives?" Her pulse jumped as she turned to Alex. He'd been correct. "Where are they now?" She edged forward in the seat, her eyes back on Detective Quinn. "Will they go off?"

"Not to worry, our bomb division will soon have them in their possession. They're designed to detonate anywhere from a few days to a week, based on the copper wall thickness inside. They also require a small top piece to be broken off before they can be detonated."

She sighed, leaning back in her chair. At least now no one would get hurt. "Did the pencil bombs Tilly carried inside go off then?"

He shook his head. "When she received the perfume box from Rhymer, we exchanged the real bombs for dummy charges. Scotland Yard had placed two plainclothes detectives inside the factory to make an arrest once she met with her brother and handed over the bombs."

"Then why the explosion?" Alex asked from behind the desk.

“It is believed that Rhymer didn’t trust her to meet with him and had a contingency plan.”

“That means my friend is innocent!” Rose cried.

“I agree with you, Miss Graham,” he said softly. “Though when Tilly failed to check in with me afterward, some were convinced she’d tipped off Rhymer about Scotland Yard’s plan and so he provided the timed devices. After making her escape just before the explosion, she vanished.” His expression held sadness. “Now I know that’s not what happened. Though Rhymer still must have activated his bombs and hidden them in a highly flammable area before making his exit, leaving the incendiaries to go off after he was gone.”

“But you could find no record of him leaving?” Alex asked.

“Unfortunately, Captain, there was such a high death toll at Chilwell with so many missing and unidentified, we were not able to track his escape.”

Rose shivered at her memories of that black night. “And you are certain Rhymer is her brother? Tilly told me that he died overseas many years ago.”

“Thomas Lockhart was twelve when he was arrested in Glasgow for setting fire to a chemist’s shop. The authorities shipped him off to a work farm in Australia. Tilly was still a small child, so she was taken off the streets and put into a local orphanage. We believe Rhymer is her brother from what she told us when we enlisted her for this assignment, but I don’t think she realized then that he was still alive.”

“Well, brother or not, I don’t believe she helped him.” Rose thrust out her chin. “My guess is, she wasn’t certain what Rhymer would do.”

She gazed at her clasped hands while her mind relived those last moments with Tilly. “Her eyes were so sad before we parted that last day. Tilly insisted I come to the party, even ordered me to take her bicycle to the cottage and wait for her. She promised she wouldn’t be long.” Rose looked up at Detective Quinn. “And then finding the gifts—she’d left me a five-pound note and a brochure to Nova Scotia. Her dream.” Rose glanced at Alex, and something in his eyes warmed her. “I think . . .”

Her voice halted. The cottage door had been *unlocked*. Making Tilly’s chain with the key and ID unnecessary. Then she recalled the words on the trade card Tilly had written: “*Become a new person, Rose. If you have the courage.*”

She swallowed hard and looked up at the two men. “Tilly must have known she might not make it out of the factory in time,” she

whispered. "I think she was saving me."

The detective's eyes glistened. "I believe you're right, Miss Graham."
"You miss her too, don't you, Detective?"

He cleared his throat, his face tinged with color. "Tilly and I worked closely together for months. In that time, I grew fond of her. She was a rough gem, but she loved life and her proud spirit touched me. If our lives had been different . . ." He stared at his hat, his fingers working around the brim. "I will never forget her."

"Nor will I." Rose smiled as tears welled in her eyes. "Tilly was my best friend. My only friend."

Detective Quinn shot her a knowing look. "Your uncle could be very unpleasant. Many times I wanted to offer you encouragement, but I could not risk my cover."

"Why *did* you take the job as his chauffeur?" Alex asked.

"Tilly told me about Miss Graham." He turned to Rose. "She said your uncle kept you under close watch, having his chauffeur drive you back and forth daily from the factory. So we arranged to pension the old driver, and I applied for the job. A bit of luck involved, I'll grant you, but the visits to the factory twice daily allowed me to contact her without arousing suspicion."

Rose's mouth slackened. So "Miles Luther" hadn't been watching her after all.

She noted then the angry red patch near his temple—and recalled the head bandage the day he'd stepped from the Rolls. "When you stopped at Tilly's cottage after the explosion, you were looking for her, weren't you?"

"I wanted to make certain she was all right." He paused, brow arched. "You were there?"

Rose flashed a rueful smile. "I hid with her dog under a brass tub in the shed. I feared you would drag me back to my uncle."

"I'm sorry you had to worry about that with me. When we recruited Tilly—"

"How *did* you and Weatherford recruit her, Quinn?"

He gazed at Alex. "Weeks before she and I met, Scotland Yard discovered Rhymer was in some way connected to her. We tracked her down and found Tilly serving time at Aylesbury Prison in Buckinghamshire. The captain offered her freedom in exchange for confirming the identity of her brother, who was believed to be sabotaging munitions plants. Chilwell was next on his list of targets, and we wanted to catch Rhymer red-handed."

“Tilly was in prison?” Rose stared. “But . . . she told me that after the orphanage, she’d worked as a maid for Lady McAllister of Perth and hired on at Chilwell after her mistress died in Nottingham.”

“As I said, she went into an orphanage when her brother was arrested,” he said quietly. “The rest of her story had to be fabricated so she could obtain employment at the factory.”

So Tilly had lied about her past. What about their friendship? Rose didn’t want to believe it was a lie too, not when it seemed Tilly had spared her life.

“What crime did she—?” Rose stopped, recalling his remark about the clockmaker in Glasgow. “Forgery?”

Detective Quinn nodded.

“I don’t understand why she couldn’t trust me with the truth . . .” Her words trailed off and she glanced at her lap. Alex could ask her that same question.

“It was necessary, Miss Graham,” he said. “The assignment was of the highest priority. Tilly was sworn to secrecy or she risked the penalty of death for treason.”

How little she’d known Tilly Lockhart . . . or Luther, for that matter. Rose shifted her eyes toward Alex. He knew just as little about her, didn’t he? *Trust him, Rose.*

Taking a deep breath, she turned back to the man who had worked for her uncle. “Have you seen Douglas and Samuel? Are they well?”

“Your brothers are back at school.” His look held mild censure. “While I understand your reasons for leaving, they took your death very hard.” He hesitated. “Lady Cutler as well.”

Rose could feel Alex’s eyes boring into her. She was relieved to know the boys were still safe, though the accusation in Detective Quinn’s tone made her agonize even more at having abandoned them.

It was on the tip of her tongue then to confess to the incident she’d witnessed in the library; the drawer where Uncle kept his secret files and the shares he’d placed in Julien’s hands. Her true reasons for leaving Leicester and the urgent need to protect Duggie and Samuel. “Detective Quinn—”

“I have a plan.”

Rose sat back as he stood and began pacing the room. Finally, he turned to her. “Tilly’s brother must already be inside the factory since he was able to get two letters to you.” He glanced between her and Alex. “Likely he learned at the same time we did, that his sister—or at least you posing as her—had arrived once your paperwork was

officially logged into the payroll.”

She glanced at Alex, who grumbled, “Aye, about the same time I was notified to surveil Tilly Lockhart.”

Her jaw dropped. “You . . . were surveilling me?”

“The captain’s mission in Gretna has been to help us uncover the saboteur,” Detective Quinn clarified.

She continued staring at Alex. He was here on a mission? Her anger stirred, along with her amazement. No wonder he’d been watching her every move over the past few weeks. He thought *she* was working with the saboteur!

“Rhymer is ready to make his move.” Detective Quinn’s words drew her attention, his dark features intent. “He is about to initiate the next target.”

Rose shivered. “How . . . will you stop him?”

“No, Quinn,” Alex growled as he, too, rose from his chair.

“I won’t stop him, Miss Graham.” Quinn looked at Alex before his eyes pierced hers. “You will.”



Me?” Rose stared at him. “How can I stop a murderer?”

“By keeping your secret.” His leathery face became animated.

“Continue to be Tilly Lockhart and meet with Rhymer. Deliver the pencil bombs. We’ll provide you with dummy charges just as we did for Tilly.” To Alex, he said, “Everything will stay as it is now. She will accompany you and your sister into work as always, and once inside with the brooch and dummy charges, we’ll get her cleared through to the factory floor. Several plainclothes detectives will be on hand at Site Three to make the arrest once Miss Lockhart meets with Rhymer.”

“What if he realizes she’s not Tilly?” Arms crossed against his chest, Alex scowled. “What then, Quinn?”

Detective Quinn’s brow creased. “I don’t believe Tilly and her brother met prior to Chilwell. She wasn’t able to confirm his identity for us before the explosion.” He paused, then added, “I suspect it’s the reason he wanted her to wear the brooch—so he would recognize her.”

Rose began to shiver. This was ludicrous! “Is it possible she did meet him and simply neglected to tell you?” She knew by living with the Bairds that family ties ran deep.

“I suppose it is.” Detective Quinn’s expression sobered. “I won’t lie to you, Miss Graham. This is a dangerous undertaking. Rhymer has already proven to be clever. He may even have spies working inside the factory watching you. Which is why you cannot tell anyone your secret.”

“What if she *is* found out?” Alex glared at him. “She could die, and my entire family and all the people who work at Moorside along with her.”

“Whether or not we go ahead with this scheme, Captain, I fear Rhymer’s plan to sabotage the factory will continue. This enterprise *is* risky, but if Tilly Lockhart’s words were true, that she hadn’t seen her brother in years, and with Miss Graham’s similar looks, Rhymer will

believe she is his sister. At least until the exchange is made. At that point our men will apprehend him.”

“Aye?” Alex scoffed. “And how did that work for you at Chilwell?”

“As I’ve said, Rhymer must have set his own timed explosives, and he could have done so days before the meeting. I also suspect his bombs detonated sooner than expected, so while he obviously made his escape, Tilly . . .” Again he cleared his throat. “It leads me to believe the two never actually had a chance to meet. For all Rhymer knows, she delivered the explosives, and now that she’s at Gretna, his next target, it’s apparent she’s earned his trust.”

Alex sneered, “Or ’tis another trap.”

Was it a trap? Overwhelmed by the detective’s revelations, Rose sat in her chair, only half listening while they argued. *She* was to be bait for the saboteur!

During the past few weeks, she’d managed to re-claim the strength and confidence she’d lost so long ago, standing up to bullies like Dobbs and speaking out for her girls, for all women. She’d even helped to win a football championship. But did she have the daring to accept this task?

She couldn’t forget that Rhymer had threatened her with the welfare of her clan, the Bairds. And she maintained the belief that Tilly had refused to go along with her brother’s plan, yet he still blew up the factory at Chilwell. Had he willingly sacrificed his own sister to accomplish his ends?

It shouldn’t surprise her, given her own uncle’s treachery. Yet beyond getting the bombs inside, and wearing the brooch to meet with Tilly’s brother—would she fool him?

If Tilly *had* met him while working at Chilwell, it could mean her own life.

And if I refuse? But Rose knew what would happen. Rhymer would still harm Alex and his family and then sabotage the factory.

Haunting memories of the explosion flooded her, and she imagined thousands dying, the surrounding towns damaged or destroyed. She couldn’t let anything happen to the people she’d come to love because of her own fear—and it seemed she was the only one who could get close enough to Rhymer to put the evidence into his hands and have him arrested.

Her heart pounded. What if she and Tilly had never traded chains? If she’d simply gone to Tilly’s flat and waited for her? Her friend would be the one pronounced dead, while she . . . she would be married to

Julien, a different kind of death.

Was she any better off now? *Lord, was this your plan for me all along?*

Rose gazed up at both men, now facing off with each other.

Most of all, she didn't want anyone else to die. "I'll do it."



His world had suddenly gone off its head.

Seated in the truck's cab, Alex gripped the steering wheel as he drove them back toward Gretna. He was still amazed to learn that Tilly wasna Tilly at all, and the real Tilly had worked with Scotland Yard at Chilwell to stop Rhymer, and paid for it with her life.

Earlier he'd listened, only half believing as Miss Rose Graham began her tale—a best friend's death in the Chilwell explosion, which she'd mentioned to him before, and her own desire to escape an overbearing guardian and a marriage she didn't want. She'd assumed Tilly's name and, with her paperwork, fled Nottingham for Scotland, having no idea of the dangers associated with her friend. She wasna alone in the world after all, but had two brothers, as well as an aunt and an uncle.

His anger at Simon and Weatherford's secrecy continued to fester. Alex tried to imagine a reason why they would have hidden the facts from him, especially when they believed Rhymer's sister had been staying in his home and jeopardizing his family!

He considered the quiet woman seated beside him, his bitter disappointment conflicting with apprehension, knowing she would soon be taking her friend's place to catch their saboteur.

She stared out her window at the passing miles, likely because every time she'd looked at him, he scowled. Alex still resented her deception; all the while he'd thought her shy when she was actually harboring a lifetime of secrets, including information that might have proved helpful in his investigation.

Miss Graham had lied about her past to his family, her co-workers, *and* to him. He gritted his teeth remembering how he'd shared his grief with her, his burden of shame at Ian's death—while she'd remained a clam about herself, unwilling to offer him the same trust.

And that's the real thorn, man. She didn't trust you. His shoulders hunched as he focused on the road ahead.

“Alex.”

He turned to find her large blue eyes gazing at him. The same eyes he’d seen yesterday, and the day before, and the day before that. “Miss Graham?”

“I haven’t grown horns, you know. I want you to trust me.”

“Like you did me?” He growled the words.

“I couldn’t tell you. I couldn’t tell anyone. If I did—”

“If you did *what* exactly?”

“There is so much at stake.” The soft touch of her hand as she placed it against his bare arm seared him. “Please, call me Rose. At least when we are alone. I cannot do this without you, Alex. I need your help.”

He frowned. “And I told Quinn I would give it. Is that not enough?”

She pursed her lips, drawing his attention to their softness and shade. His eyes grazed over the familiar face, her smooth skin a slightly sallow hue but still fine like her dark brows, and the rich brown hair tucked beneath her straw hat.

At least her features didn’t change with her name. They could belong to no one else.

“I did tell you the truth about a lot of things.”

He snorted, staring at the road. “Like what?”

“My mum and dad. She *was* a dressmaker, and he was a weaver, and they did have a shop—Graham’s Drapers and Haberdashery on Princes Street in Edinburgh, not Glasgow.”

Auld Reekie? He remembered then her near slip when he’d told her about his childhood there. The reminder of how much he’d shared with her angered him. “And what about your two brothers? You neglected to mention them.”

“I . . . was trying to protect them. My uncle would have been furious if he’d known that I had escaped before the marriage. I worried that he would take it out on Douglas and Samuel.”

How was she protecting them when they believed her dead? Alex shook his head in disgust. “When did you go and live with this uncle of yours?”

“As I told you and your family, I *was* fourteen when my parents died. The shop had debts, and I suppose we were fortunate that my mother’s sister took pity on us. I attended English boarding schools until two years ago when I returned to Leicester and served as my aunt’s companion. About four months ago I begged my uncle to let me go to work at the munitions factory in Nottingham, and that’s where I met Tilly.”

As he listened, the name *Graham* and *Leicester* seemed familiar. It dawned on him—the article in the *Times*. “Your uncle is Sir Ridley Cutler, the munitions magnate?”

“He is my guardian.”

Stunned, Alex was only vaguely aware of the tremor in her quiet response. Cutler Industries was a leading manufacturer of munitions and armaments. Miss Graham—Rose—had lived a life of luxury, yet she fled to take on the life of a woman who by all accounts had been a poor domestic. He turned to her. “Why did you do it?” When her expression clouded, he added, “You staged your own death merely because you didn’t wish to marry?” He grimaced, turning back at the road. “The man must have been a real scunner.”

“Trust me, he is the worst of men.” Her voice vibrated with emotion.

“Who is he?” When she didn’t answer him, he darted a glance and saw the color had drained from her face. Was she frightened . . . or thinking to come up with more lies?

“May I ask you a question first?”

“Aye.”

“How well do you know Julien Dexter?”

He slowed the truck, then turned to her. “Dexter?”

“You two are friends.” Her blue eyes darkened, and he noted the tremble in her chin.

He sighed. “Dexter is a preening dunderhead, and ’tis my hope I’ve seen the last of him in this lifetime.” He lifted a brow. “Does that answer your question?”

A slow smile spread across her face, and his traitorous pulse leapt. “It does.”

“And?”

“I was supposed to marry him.” She arched a fine brow right back. “Does that answer yours?”

So he was right, though it still jarred him. Alex leaned back against the seat. “The only thing it doesn’t tell me is why you only ran as far as Gretna.”

She giggled then, and he couldn’t help but smile. Her reasons for secrecy were beginning to make sense. “And you saw me with Dexter at the factory,” he said.

“Yes, and I heard him tell Hannah and the girls that you two once flew together. The newspaperman also claimed you were pals.”

“How did you hear what was said?”

“I was hiding behind the concrete support.”

“So you ran.” He angled his head. “You were never sick, were you?”

Her smile fell. “I can say truthfully that seeing him made me ill. I was terrified he would notice me and drag me back to Leicester.”

“When was the wedding to happen?”

“My first day at the factory.”

Alex absorbed the information. She’d mentioned Dexter during their ride to visit the castles. No doubt trying to figure out which camp he was in. “You couldna speak with your aunt or uncle about Dexter?”

“Uncle Ridley arranged the match.” Her tone held bitterness. “He wanted a connection with the Earl of Stanton.”

Alex grunted. It surely fit the mold of any opportunist who had made his fortune in new money. Cutler was knighted and wealthy as Midas, but the chance to tie his bloodline to the auld nobility, like the Earl of Stanton, must have been too good to resist, offering up his attractive ward as sacrifice. “What about your aunt?”

Again she fell silent, and he turned to see her blue eyes flare. “Aunt Delia was conditioned long ago to be seen and not heard.”

Disquiet settled over him, and he tried to imagine Rose’s life with an uncle she’d described as overbearing and who had used her to barter his way into Stanton’s realm.

And an aunt who could not save her. “So tell me more about your brothers.”

“Douglas and Samuel are close in age to Fergus and James.”

He glanced at her. “Where are they now? Quinn mentioned something about school?”

“Caldicott School in Hertfordshire. I’ve telephoned a couple of times to check on them, pretending to be my aunt. We remained at school year-round, except at Christmas.”

All year? His mind flashed with the memory of her face when he’d kissed the top of his sister’s head in the truck. The sadness in her expression tore at him.

He also remembered her glow when she spoke of her maw and da and their shop. “What about your plans to go abroad? You said earlier it was Tilly’s dream. Is it yours as well?”

“Not at first, but I decided it would be mine after she died. I shall take Douglas and Samuel out of school, and we’ll sail for Nova Scotia, ‘New Scotland,’ where we can start a new life together. A real family.”

Seeing her smile and the hope in her eyes was a sharp reminder of their coming plan and his growing fear she wouldna live long enough to see her dream fulfilled.

Regardless of his struggle to reconcile the woman he'd known with the woman beside him, Rose Graham was about to risk her life for his family, his home, and all those at Moorside.

He wasna going to stand by and watch her die.



OFFICE OF THE ADMIRALTY
WHITEHALL, LONDON
MONDAY, JULY 29

Tilly Lockhart is dead?"

Perched on the edge of his desk, Marcus observed Simon's shock. Then he glanced toward Quinn, seated in the leather chair beside his friend. "Care to enlighten the captain?"

The detective took several minutes to explain his working as Sir Ridley Cutler's chauffeur and driving Cutler's ward back and forth to the Chilwell factory each day. Allowing him to make contact with Miss Lockhart without arousing Rhymer's suspicions.

He also relayed yesterday's surprise confrontation at East Fortune, when he'd come face-to-face not with Tilly Lockhart but with Cutler's ward, Rose Graham, posing as her friend and giving him the sad news it was Tilly who had died in the Chilwell explosion.

"That's a tangle if I ever heard one," Simon said when Quinn had finished. "And now the plan is to have Miss Graham meet with Rhymer pretending to be his sister?"

"Correct," Marcus said. "It is our only choice if we still want to catch him."

"And if he realizes he's been given a substitute sister?"

"A chance we have to take, Captain," Quinn said. "I want to believe that Miss Lockhart and her brother did *not* meet prior to the explosion at Chilwell, but there is no guarantee. Miss Graham is still willing to participate, as is Captain Baird, though he's not pleased with the idea."

"I dinna doubt it." Simon looked at Marcus. "And I'm certain Alex has branded us both traitors for not telling him the whole story. He believes we put his family at great risk."

Marcus met his friend's angry gaze, a barb of guilt piercing his

conscience. Then he considered the hundreds who had already perished in the past three explosions and pushed off the heavy yoke. "It needed to be done, Simon. If we had exposed Tilly Lockhart, Rhymer would have discovered something was up weeks ago *and* detonated Moorside in revenge. As it is now, we still have secrecy on our side and some control over the situation, thanks to Miss Graham's willingness to help. Rhymer believes she is his sister and he's sent her the timed explosives. All we need to do is to get her and the bombs inside to meet with him." *And pray the blighter hasn't outfoxed us again with his own arsenal.*

He turned to Quinn. "When will your department have the dummy charges ready?"

"Wednesday morning. I've arranged to meet Captain Baird in Carlisle rather than Gretna to hand them off, and he'll see that Miss Graham gets them." Quinn eyed them both. "We don't know if Rhymer's been surveilling them, and if he saw me before at Chilwell . . ."

"Righto," Marcus agreed. "I want absolutely no one else privy to this new information on Miss Graham. We are too close now to take chances." He tipped his head at Quinn. "When will Scotland Yard have their men in place?"

"We've had two plainclothes detectives working at Moorside in Gretna for the past month. They relocated to Miss Graham's section this morning. Transfers are common, and because the men have been employed awhile, they shouldn't raise suspicions. Our own officers have replaced factory police stationed at all gates and we've added extra policewomen. They'll stay focused on Miss Graham, while the two detectives are put in charge of off-loading bales in the cotton stores where Rhymer's meeting is to take place."

"Miss Graham has this brooch Rhymer speaks about?"

"Yes, and she'll have it with her on Thursday when she takes the dummy charges inside. A policewoman will ensure she gets through the inspection and onto the factory floor. From there she'll make her way toward the cotton stores at noon to meet with Rhymer."

"So, tell me truthfully," Marcus said, giving voice to his most urgent concern, "can Miss Graham pull this off?"

Quinn's dark brows veed. "A month ago, I would have said no."

Marcus moved around to sit at his desk. "Explain."

"I'll begin by saying that Sir Cutler is not an easy man to live with or to work for. As his driver, I discovered he takes a dim view of children and in particular his wife's Scots relations. For the six years Miss

Graham and her young brothers have been in his care, he's kept them isolated in boarding schools almost year-round, while Lady Cutler . . ." Quinn shook his head. "He's bullied her to the point that she's little more than an ornament at his social gatherings, and no support to the children.

"Once Miss Graham finished school, she served as her aunt's companion. During my employment at the Leicester estate, there were many times she endured the brunt of her uncle's displeasure. She became more reserved and often tense, especially in his company, and with her fiancé."

At this last, Marcus realized Miss Graham had been at Moorside for weeks. "Is there any chance Lieutenant Dexter saw her at the factory when he was there?" Though they hadn't yet made the connection between the lieutenant and Kahverengi, Marcus recoiled at the possibility Dexter reported her presence to the arms dealer and Rhymer was advised.

"I doubt the lieutenant saw her, otherwise he would have arranged for Sir Cutler to bring her home." Quinn paused. "And Rhymer would not have sent her explosives if he believed she was other than his sister."

Marcus leaned back against the seat, his rapid pulse ebbing. "So what changed your mind about her?"

"The Rose Graham I met yesterday has a strength I hadn't seen before. Courage in her stance and in her actions, and she holds great affection for Captain Baird's family and the young women she supervises." He shrugged. "I cannot be more specific, just to say the look in her eyes and the tone of her voice tell me she's committed to protecting her own."

"That's reassuring." Marcus drew a deep breath. "I regret the death of Miss Lockhart, but I believe Miss Graham's presence and her willingness to help at Moorside is Providence." He gazed at both men. "Our last hope of putting Rhymer and Kahverengi out of business permanently."



HM FACTORY GRETNNA
TUESDAY, JULY 30

Was he watching her even now?

Again, Rose tried tucking the question into the back of her mind without success. Since returning to work yesterday, her thoughts had been preoccupied with Rhymer and the events to come. Each task she performed in her job now seemed like a mountain to climb, and it was an effort to appear calm and assured in front of her girls, especially when she had to explain why she missed their tea on Sunday—a question Hannah confronted her and Alex with late Sunday night when they arrived back at the cottage.

Alex's ability to prevaricate had rivaled her own. He offered his sister a concocted story about the lorry having engine trouble, and his needing to walk to the nearest town to get a part before they could return home. Rose relayed that same story to Gladys, Colleen, and Betty yesterday in the canteen.

Seated at her desk, she continued the tedious work of filling out reports for her section, and soon her thoughts wandered back to the airfield and her shock at seeing Luther—Detective Quinn. He'd assured both her and Alex that Scotland Yard would prepare the dummy charges she was to bring into the factory, and he would meet Alex in Carlisle tomorrow, on the eve of her encounter with the devil himself—and hand them over.

A shaky sigh escaped her. At least Alex was on her side *and* he knew the truth about her. She'd also been relieved to discover he held Julien in the same contempt. A smile edged her lips, recalling his remark about her escaping only as far as Gretna. He knew Lord Julien Dexter's stripes well!

Rose had even braved telling him about her brothers, and it was true

she worried for their safety if Uncle ever discovered she'd fled the marriage. Though the secret transaction she'd witnessed in the library would remain with her until she could guarantee the boys wouldn't be harmed.

Alex too had harbored his share of secrets—like returning to Gretna *not* because of a medical discharge, but instead receiving orders to come here and find Rhymer.

It seemed they'd each worn a mask of sorts, yet she hoped the secrecy was at an end, at least between the two of them. As the coming meeting with Rhymer drew closer, Rose would need his help and friendship more than ever.

Did they still have a friendship?

Last night at the cottage, it felt strange hearing the rest of the Baird family call her "Miss Lockhart" or "Tilly" while Alex looked on knowingly. His silent censure of her made the ruse all the more difficult to maintain.

If she could only regain his trust . . . yet it so much was more than that. She longed for his soft looks, and those tender smiles. Their shared laughter. He'd shown her a glimmer on the way home Sunday, and she ached all the more to return to the way they had been before.

"How are you holding up, lass?"

As if summoned by her thoughts, Alex appeared at the door into her office. She gripped the pencil in her hand. "Much the same as yesterday—on pins and needles. I keep expecting to see *him* around every corner, though I have no idea what he looks like." Her eyes beseeched him. "I just want this to be over, Alex."

"You and me both." He angled his head, gazing at her. "I am here for you, lass, so dinna fash too much, all right?"

His voice had gentled, and Rose fought an impulse to leave the desk and rush into his arms. The courage she'd mustered over the past two days was beginning to crumble, and she desperately needed his strength.

Instead, she rose from the chair and drew her shoulders back. "I'll do my best." But then tears misted her eyes as she added, "Alex, I am glad that you're here."

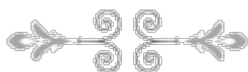
He started to take a step closer, then halted, giving her the barest of smiles. He checked his watch. "I'd better get back. Quinn asked me to check in with the two detectives who transferred to the cotton stores yesterday. I'll see you after work."

"'After' cannot get here soon enough." She longed to escape the

factory and Rhymer's watchful eye, and return to the warm security of the Baird home.

"I'll meet you at the platform when the shift is over," he said.

Then he turned and was gone, taking with him a piece of her heart.



"Alex, Miss Lockhart, truly?" His sister eyed them both at the supper table later that evening, and Alex caught her nervous excitement in the pink suffusing her cheeks.

"As long as your mother and father approve."

Tilly . . . Rose glanced again at his maw and da, who smiled and nodded their consent. "So long as ye mind yerself with yer brother and Tilly," Maw warned her.

"Aye!" Hannah turned her grin on him and Rose before leaping up from her chair at the table. "Thank you both so much! I'll be dressed in just a tick."

As she rushed from the dining room, Alex swiveled his attention to Rose. "Are you certain you're up to a dance?" He'd noted her lines of exhaustion as she'd agreed to chaperone his sister tonight for the Mixed Club dance at Gretna's Border Hall. He had decided to go along as well, to make certain she didna run into any trouble with Dobbs, in case the union man was skulking about town.

"Of course I'm up to it." Rose turned to him and smiled. "Hannah deserves a night of dancing, so she can practice on you what she's learned." Despite her weariness, a teasing light entered her eyes and sped up his pulse. She sobered, adding, "I want her to have fun tonight, Alex. These days, there seems precious little time for enjoyment."

He kenned her meaning only too well. In less than forty-eight hours Rose would face and try to fool a madman. God forbid, but if she failed there would be nothing left for any of them to enjoy.

Hours ago at work, he had seen her fear and heard the waver in her voice while her eyes welled with unshed tears. He'd wanted to go to her but checked himself. Likely he would have done her more harm than good, making her soft when she needed to be strong for what was to come.

Alex still disliked Quinn's plan, though there were few other options. The detective was right—if they didna go through with it, the sabotage would still happen. Better she—they—had a chance to stop Rhymer, or

die trying.

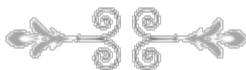
He tossed his napkin onto the table. Just the thought of losing her pierced his soul. While he resented her not trusting him with the truth, and deceiving his family, he also applauded her desire to escape a marriage to Dexter. And Rose hadna been entirely untruthful with her story, but just enough to keep herself safe, especially when she believed Alex was pals with that scunner.

She'd been a great help to his maw over the past few weeks, and she paid her rent on time. Rose had even added her rations to his family's stores so they would all have enough to eat.

In fact, if he was honest, his parents and siblings were no worse off for Rose keeping her secret. *And neither are you, man.* It was his pride that fueled his resentment, and *had* he known the truth about her any earlier, Tilly Lockhart would have ceased to exist and this plan about to unfold with Rose couldna take place.

Alex pushed out a sigh as he rose from his chair. *Aye, your ways are not our ways, Lord, but I pray she succeeds.*

"I'm ready to go!" His sister had reappeared, wearing her new green frock. Her joy dimmed as she looked first at Rose, then at him. "Well now? If you two dinna hurry and get changed, we'll miss the dance altogether!"



Illuminated by the evening sun shining through an array of windows, Border Hall seemed festive, as balcony walls strung in blue-and-white bunting surrounded the spacious, polished wood floor. Lining the perimeter were covered tables holding glass jars filled with summer heather and pink begonias, set amidst punch bowls of lemonade and plates of jam biscuits, tea sandwiches, and fruit tarts.

The factory band had set up on a dais at one end of the hall, playing continuously as dozens of couples, most of them young girls from the factory, cavorted across the room showing off dance steps like the Grizzly Bear, the Lane Duck, and a fast waltz to the energetic tempo of Scott Joplin's music.

Rose had taken a seat among an assembly of chairs lining the wall. In her mauve jacket and skirt, she watched while Alex danced with his sister. It was a fast tune, and she smiled while observing several of the young girls eyeing Hannah with envy as her brother effortlessly swept

her across the floor in a ragtime waltz. Though the past few weeks of dance practice had improved Hannah's steps, Alex was such a fine partner it left little for the girl to worry about as his sure, strong movements kept her light on her feet.

Rose had wanted this night for Hannah, and for herself too; in two days neither of them might ever again have the chance.

The song slowly faded, and once Hannah flew off to meet Betty, Colleen, and Gladys, who had recently arrived, Alex grabbed up two glasses of lemonade from the refreshment table and walked in Rose's direction.

"Where did you learn to dance so well?" she asked him, taking the glass he offered her.

"There's more to college than just football," he said with a devilish smile. "I remember asking you that question once, but we were interrupted." He glanced toward his sister, then back at her. "Well?"

She made a face. "Six weeks of finishing school, I'm afraid. Once my fate was sealed as a prospective Lady Stanton, Uncle Ridley sent me off to try to turn a 'sow's ear into a silk purse.'"

His expression darkened. Rose looked away as heat stole into her cheeks. Perhaps she'd offered a bit too much truth. She raised her eyes to him again and lifted a shoulder. "Anyway, that's how I learned the waltz, along with a few other dances."

He turned and surveyed the room. "Well, I noticed you havna danced with anyone, and already we've been here an hour."

She followed his gaze, scanning the few males in attendance. Most were elderly staff or boys who worked in the factory. "It would seem we women are in short supply of dance partners, Captain," she said in amusement. "Though I've been keeping an eye on the girls keeping an eye on you, and you're the most eligible. So be careful about wearing out your shoes."

He laughed, and it was like manna to the hunger gnawing at her heart. How she'd missed that sound! She schooled her features, however, and stood, intending to fetch a biscuit from a nearby table when the lilting notes of the next song began.

He set down his glass and held out his hand. "You ken that I've one spot still open on my dance card, so are you willing?"

Her heart sped, seeing his expectant gaze. "I have shoes on this time, so I suppose I'm safe enough."

"Always with me, lass." He grinned, and as she set down her glass and gave him her hand, he led her out onto the dance floor.

Recognizing the tune as he took her in his arms—a new American song titled “Will You Remember?”—Rose was suddenly whirled into a waltz across the floor.

His gaze held hers as he swept her aloft, like the fluff off a dandelion swirling in the breeze. Soon Rose became immersed in the enchanting music, aware only of her pounding pulse and his strong hand pressed gently at her back while his other kept her warm in his grip.

Words seemed unnecessary as they stared into each other’s eyes; hers pleading forgiveness for the lies and not trusting him, and his glowing with affection, and the sudden pressure of his hand offering sorrow for the harsh words that had passed between them.

Her smile turned bittersweet as she recalled the words to the music. Would they remember? This time together *was* precious, as their future and the future of all here at Border Hall, the factory, and its surrounding area could change in the span of a heartbeat or a breath. She gazed at his generous mouth. Even a kiss . . .

Or an explosion that could destroy everything they both held dear.

**WEDNESDAY, JULY 31—NEXT DAY**

He'd almost kissed her last night.

Alex stood on the train platform at the end of shift the following day, his thoughts veering between the memory of Rose in his arms and their intimate, silent exchange . . . and the harsh reality of today's rendezvous with Quinn to pick up the dummy charges she'd take into the factory tomorrow to meet with Rhymer. If anything happened to her . . .

"Dear God, please help us," he muttered softly.

"Are you blethering to yourself now, Brother?" Hannah strode up to him, grinning.

"I was thinking how you nearly wore me out dancing," he teased. "I'm not a young lad anymore."

She laughed. "Some auld man you are. At least two dozen lassies came up to me last night to find out who I was dancing with." Her eyes glinted against her yellow complexion. "If I charged a bob for each time I answered, I could have bought two new hats to go with my gloves."

He chuckled, and his sister turned to glance behind her. "Miss Lockhart's here!"

Alex looked up at her approach, his heart thudding in his chest. Again his mind filled with the memory of holding her, light as a fall leaf, as they'd danced and entered into a world all their own. For those few minutes he'd realized that she was the same woman, with the same dark hair, the same blue eyes, the same intelligence and humor and kindness. She was Tilly, aye, and she was Rose.

"Hurry! We can catch the first train!" Hannah cried as she rushed forward.

Alex and Rose followed behind, and when her hand reached for his,

he gave her fingers a squeeze before they separated to board the train.

His sister thankfully filled the silence between them as she blethered on about her day, and Alex sat beside Rose, hoping his presence would ease some of her nervousness. Later he'd go over tomorrow morning's details with her and make sure she was still ready.

Twenty minutes later, they arrived home, and he was surprised to see a truck parked next to the cottage. Entering into the parlor, he paused and his mood darkened. "Stuart."

"Good afternoon, Captain Baird." The blond lieutenant set his teacup on the table, then rose from the chair beside Da's.

"Alex, I was just visiting with your friend from the airfield." His da came to his feet, leaning on his cane. "He arrived no more than ten minutes ago."

"This is a surprise, Lieutenant." Alex offered a tight smile. "If I'd known you were coming, I would have made an effort to leave work earlier."

"Och, dinna fash, Captain." Stuart grinned, displaying his straight white teeth. "I had to come to the village on factory business and I've taken a room at the hotel."

Alex nodded. With Rose about to meet Rhymer, Weatherford had ordered Stuart to Gretna.

"And who is this?" When Stuart looked beyond him, Alex turned to see Rose and his sister enter the parlor.

"Lieutenant Charles Stuart, this is my sister Hannah and Miss Lockhart."

Stuart inclined his head. "I'm pleased to meet you both."

Mrs. Baird appeared from the kitchen. "Hannah, would ye be a lamb and set the table, and add a plate for our guest." She turned to Alex.

"Fetch the lads, will ye, son? They're in back with the dog."

"I'll join you," Stuart offered, and before Alex could object, the lieutenant followed him through the parlor toward the back porch.

"A wee bit of warning would have been appreciated," Alex muttered as they reached the back door.

"Aye, but I only got my orders last night. My 'transfer' out of East Fortune processed this morning so no questions would be asked, and there was not time to give you notice."

Alex opened the door to call his brothers inside, and Winston suddenly darted past him into the cottage.

"Och, what a bonny wee dog you've got."

As Stuart knelt, the dog went right to him, licking his hands and

wagging his tail.

“Winston likes you.”

Alex and Stuart turned to see Rose gazing down at the dog. “I’ve never seen him do that. He usually growls first, until you give him your hand and he catches your scent.”

Stuart rose to his feet. “No doubt he smells my mascot.”

“Mascot?” She took a step closer to Stuart while Alex looked on, clenching his smile.

“Aye, my fox, Queenie. She actually belongs to the instructors, but she often rides with us in the cockpit when we go up.”

“Truly?” She glanced at Alex. “Did you know about these mascots?”

His smile eased. “Many pilots fly with a mascot. Pigeons, small dogs, snakes.”

“Eek!” She made a face. “I should not wish to have a snake for a pet.”

“You’re a Sassenach?” Stuart asked her suddenly.

Her eyes widened at Alex before she turned to Stuart. “I was born in Glasgow, but I became a lady’s companion to an Englishwoman for several years, and she influenced me.”

Alex admired her calm, relieved when Stuart seemed satisfied with her answer. “Fergus, James, supper!” he bellowed, and once the lads scurried inside, he instructed them to go and wash.

“I’ll just take Winston outside.” She smiled at Alex, then at Stuart before grabbing up the wee beastie in her arms and taking him out beyond the porch.

“Och, what a jammy dog to be cuddled by such a bonny lass,” Stuart breathed once she’d gone outside.

“Keep your focus, Lieutenant.”

“Believe me, Captain. I’m very focused.” Stuart’s dark eyes gleamed.

Alex glared at him. The sooner their meal was done and this wolf could be on his way, the better.

Once Rose rejoined them, they went into the dining room. Alex saw that his da had already settled the lads, and his maw and Hannah were seated at the table.

“Allow me, Miss Lockhart.” Stuart rushed forward to pull out Rose’s chair.

“Why, thank you, Lieutenant.” She smiled, and as she took her seat, Stuart leaned in and said, “My pleasure, lass.”

Alex worked his jaw watching the exchange. He waited until Stuart was seated on the other side of the table next to Hannah before he

finally took his own chair.

They said grace, and his maw began serving the meal. "Lieutenant, please tell us how ye know Alex," she said as she passed out the first plate of collops and tatties.

"He didna tell you, ma'am?" Stuart shot him a wounded look Alex easily dismissed. "He and my brother Donald went to primary school together in Edinburgh."

"Och, is that so? Stuart . . ." Maw turned to his da. "I seem to recall a Donald Stuart when I was caring for wee Alex." She beamed at the lieutenant. "Where is he now?"

Stuart's smile faded. "I'm sorry to say Donald was killed in action. The Battle of Jutland."

His maw's face paled, piercing Alex with a fresh blade of guilt.

"We lost our Ian last year," she said.

"I am aware, ma'am, and you have my sympathy."

Maw reached out to touch Stuart's hand. "'Tis sad, this war takes so many of our lads."

She glanced at Alex, and he warmed at her loving gaze. "I'm happy that our auldest is here with us."

"Aye, 'tis a blessing," Stuart offered. "Though the lads at the airfield miss him."

"Do they?" His da's brows arched.

"Indeed, sir." He smiled at Alex. "A distinguished captain, your son. The cadets think very highly of him."

"Well now, that's a fine thing to hear, thank you, Lieutenant." The pride in Da's voice worked to thaw Alex's temperament. Stuart had a bit of the devil in him, but he could be decent when it suited.

Maw too seemed pleased as she finished passing around the filled plates. As Alex tucked into his bacon and potatoes, he only half listened while Stuart reiterated for his family the work he'd done with the oil company before the war, and his traveling throughout Europe.

Occasionally Alex glanced up from his meal, disheartened to see Rose completely taken in by Stuart. He was relieved when supper was finally over. Now the Bonny Prince could go back to his hotel.

Then Maw stood and announced, "Since we've a special guest tonight, we'll take our dessert out to the back porch and enjoy this lovely evening."

"A fine idea, Mrs. Baird, thank you." Stuart rose to his feet, then helped Da from his chair before the two headed back toward the porch.

Alex's sister and brothers were quick to follow.

“What a thoughtful lad.” Maw watched the pair as she began clearing dishes.

“The lieutenant does seem quite likable,” Rose said as she helped his maw. “Did you know his brother for very long, Alex?”

He shrugged. “A year or two, before we moved to Gretna, but the lieutenant still remembers Donald and me playing football with the aulder lads from school.”

“Och, I remember, too!” Maw smiled at Rose. “They had a fine time after school most evenings, playing their game in the street. I seem to recall aging a few years, watching them wait until the grocer’s truck was about to drive past before they kicked that ball.”

Alex chuckled. “We were young, Maw, and had no sense. We lived for the thrill.”

“Aye, ye did, and ye gave me the gray hairs to prove it.” She glanced at them both. “Go on now. I’ll be out with a tray soon.”

Rose walked with him toward the back door. “Do you like Lieutenant Stuart?”

Alex shrugged. “He’s all right. A bit full of himself.”

She gave him a knowing smile, and heat crept along his neck.

“I think he is quite charming.”

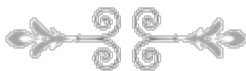
Alex snorted. “I dinna find him so.”

“I should think not.”

Her smile broadened, and he stilled an urge to rub his thumb across her lips and test their softness. “Stuart was the man we were to meet at East Fortune on Sunday.” Instantly her humor fled, and he regretted his words. “’Tis all right, he’s just here to observe.”

Her blue eyes searched his. “Does he know . . . about me?”

Alex took her hands and placed them between his. “Quinn said again today it has to remain our secret. As far as anyone’s concerned, you *are* Tilly Lockhart.” He gently pressed his palms against her skin. “Even with Stuart.”



Rose nodded, comforted by his warm touch. She hadn’t forgotten their dance, the way he’d looked at her, as if to say they were once again as they’d been before.

He released her and opened the back door, ushering her out onto the porch. The summer evening was redolent with the scent of pine and

heather.

“Miss Lockhart, will you come and join me?” Lieutenant Stuart had taken the wicker chair beside hers. He smiled. “I blethered on all through supper about my life, and now I’d very much like to hear about yours.”

She glanced at Alex and, noting his frown, lifted her shoulders before moving to sit beside the lieutenant. Rose had to admit, with his curly blond hair and eyes the color of twilight, Lieutenant Stuart was quite dashing. Even Winston had taken to him surprisingly well.

His sunny, lighthearted nature also appealed to her, as lately she’d lived hourly under a cloud of nervous apprehension. Tonight she had determined to forget what lay ahead, and she enjoyed listening to Lieutenant Stuart’s adventures in Argentina, Russia, Turkey, and so many other places the Shell Oil Company had sent him. How many languages he must have heard spoken in those different countries! And no doubt strange customs, making her even more curious about the people she would one day meet when she and her brothers arrived in Nova Scotia.

“So tell me, Miss Lockhart. You said you were born in Glasgow. Did you live there most of your childhood?”

“I did.”

He nodded. “Glasgow’s industry has been mostly shipbuilding. Is your father in the trade?”

“He and my mum had a shop—a draper and haberdashery. I was fourteen when they died and I was sent to an orphanage.”

“Och, I’m sorry, lass.” His brow furrowed. “Do you have siblings?”

Rose glanced over at Alex, seated in his usual chair across the porch. He seemed intent on their conversation. “A brother.” She turned back to the lieutenant. “But he died very young.”

She gazed at her lap, forcing herself to concentrate. “When I finally left the orphanage, I took the post as lady’s companion, as I told you, and my English mistress had a holding in Nottingham. She passed away there several months ago, so I stayed on and took a job at the local munitions factory.”

“What finally brought you to Gretna?”

She lifted her face, noting the intensity in his gaze. “I wanted to return to my homeland, and after . . . after my dearest friend died in a factory explosion, I chose to leave and come north.”

“Poor lass.” He reached to cover her hand with his own. “You’ve had a rough time then?”

Conscious of his touch, Rose didn't dare glance at Alex. Likely he was glowering at them both. She gently extricated her hand. "Life never turns out the way we expect," she said, seeing the truth in her own words. "Anyway, I was fortunate to get work at the Gretna factory and take a room here with the Bairds."

As she spoke, Rose gazed fondly across the porch at Mr. Baird, cleaning his pipe and smiling at his two youngest sons playing in the yard. Hannah had taken up her place on the stump, laughing over her brothers' antics.

She turned to him. "They treat me like one of the family."

"I can see that," he said quietly. "You're a jammy lass to have such a home."

Suddenly Winston's excited barking drew their attention. All eyes turned to see the dog dancing on hind legs as little James held the stocking ball in the air. When he finally threw it out into the yard, the dog raced like a rabbit toward his prize.

Stuart chuckled. "They seem to love that wee dog. Winston, is it? Is he yours?"

"Yes, I've only had him about a month." She grinned, watching the boys chase hopelessly after her much faster dog, the smelly wool ball in his mouth. "And he's quite lovable, though I'm glad he gets his exercise with the Baird children."

She turned and found the lieutenant staring at her. As heat climbed up her neck he grinned. "Aye, would that a man had that kind of energy."

Rose didn't have time to register his innuendo. "Dessert everyone!" Mrs. Baird appeared with a tray of Cranachan, much to the boys' delight. They stopped chasing Winston and ran to the porch.

The lieutenant leaned forward. "Cranachan! I canna recall when I had it last."

"I hadn't tasted it in years, until we recently celebrated Hannah's birthday." Rose lifted a brow. "Consider yourself an honored guest."

He laughed, and she turned to take her bowl of raspberries and cream from Mrs. Baird and caught Alex brooding across the porch.

Why was he determined to be so sour? Tomorrow was soon enough to fret about the danger they were about to undertake. Lieutenant Stuart had been the perfect gentleman and very attentive. Rose made a point to hand him her bowl of Cranachan. "Take this, and I'll get another."

"Why, thank you, Miss Lockhart." Accepting the bowl, he balanced it

on the arm of his chair. "Excuse me, but I noticed Mr. Baird also enjoys a pipe. I've a pouch of choice Turkish tobacco in the truck I think he might like to try. I'll be right back."

"How kind of you! I'm certain he will be pleased." Rose watched him go, then gave Alex a look of censure before taking another bowl of the Cranachan for herself.

Minutes later, the lieutenant returned and went directly to Mr. Baird with his offering. Delighted in accepting the pouch, Alex's father quickly filled his pipe and struck a match. Soon the exotic fragrance filled the air, and Rose again tried to imagine the strange, wonderful places Lieutenant Stuart had visited.

He returned to sit beside her, and while they enjoyed their desserts, Mrs. Baird brought out her basket of mending.

"May I help?" Rose called to her, setting her bowl aside.

"There's plenty of time for that, lass. Enjoy your evening." Mrs. Baird gave her a loving smile, and unexpectedly Rose's eyes burned.

She remembered when she'd intended to leave, worried Alex would tell Julien she was here. Mrs. Baird had said it felt as though she were about to lose another bairn; and in the weeks since Rose had come to live with this family, she realized she'd found a second mother. And a father, she thought, looking at Mr. Baird puffing on his pipe.

Hannah was the sister she'd never had, and Rose shifted her attention to the reddish-haired blonde seated on the stump. The girl applauded each time Winston got the best of her brothers.

And Alex . . . Rose gazed at him next, seeing his broad shoulders tense, the strong features set as he eyed her from across the porch.

"I fear 'tis time I took my leave."

Beside her, the lieutenant rose from his chair. "I had a long drive and a long day and I'm ready to enjoy a comfortable bed at the hotel."

Alex also stood. "I'll see you out."

The lieutenant nodded. "Miss Lockhart, meeting you tonight was like shining a light into my dark world. I look forward to our next encounter."

Her mouth opened as he reached for her hand and bent to kiss it lightly.

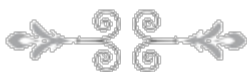
Hannah giggled from the yard.

Once he'd thanked Mrs. Baird for her fine meal and said his good-byes, he and Alex left the porch. "Miss Lockhart, he kissed your hand!" Hannah said with a good-natured pout after they'd gone.

Again Rose blushed and said primly "It only means that he's a

gentleman, Hannah. Nothing more.”

“So you say, but I noticed he didn’t kiss my hand or Maw’s.”
At that, everyone laughed, including Rose.



Standing out on the front porch, Alex heard their laughter in back, though it failed to lighten his mood. “I trust you enjoyed yourself tonight, Lieutenant,” he said tersely. Despite Stuart’s pleasant overtures to his family, he resented his playacting the love-sick swain to Rose. Surely she’d seen through his manure!

“My evening with Miss Lockhart was very enlightening.” Stuart smiled while his eyes held challenge. “You’re fashing over my attention to her?”

“My concern at the moment is how this Rhymer business will play out tomorrow.” He eyed Stuart. “You’ve been briefed by Weatherford?”

“Aye. Miss Lockhart’s to meet her brother at the cotton stores with the bombs at noon tomorrow. I’ve been issued a constable’s uniform and will stand by at the section entrance.”

“Good enough.” He walked with Stuart to the truck. The lieutenant climbed in and set the throttle while Alex went to the front and cranked over the engine. He stopped back at the cab window.

“I’m grateful you didn’t boot me out once you found me here, Captain. My parents died long ago, and with Donald gone, ’tis nice spending time with one of his auld friends.”

Nodding, Alex averted his gaze. He hadn’t considered that Stuart might now be alone in the world. “Take care driving back to town,” he said, his tone gruff. “Wouldn’t want you running over a football.”

Stuart grinned. “Thanks for the warning, pal. See you tomorrow.”

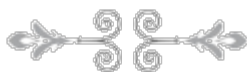
Alex watched the lieutenant drive away, his thoughts lingering over fond memories of his childhood when he and the lads played in the streets after school. Days and years of innocence blurring together, but always filled with love and friendship and his hope for the future. A time before the war and his brother’s death, before the scars on his back and those in his head that would haunt him forever. *“A time to forgive and be forgiven, Alex. To forget the past and look ahead to a new future.”*

Rose’s words to him. He tipped his face to the sky remembering back to that Sunday evening, her smooth skin and soft pink lips, the dark

lashes fanned against her cheeks while she slept like an angel. Harboring a peace that always seemed to elude him.

He suddenly yearned to turn back the clock—past the death and destruction, when he still took joy in each morning viewing the world through a child's eyes.

When men like Rhymer and the death merchant didna pose a threat to Rose or his family.



The summer sun had already begun its slow descent below the trees. Rose hugged herself as she stood out on the porch, gazing up at the myriad pink and purple tufts hovering against the sky. Everyone else had gone inside, but she remained, wanting to make the moment last while her hope for the future tangled with what was about to take place in just hours.

In the morning, Alex would give her the dummy charges that she was to carry into the factory. And at noon, she planned to meet Tilly's brother—a murderer by all accounts—and she hoped for his arrest and an end to the danger threatening those she'd come to care about so deeply.

"Tilly, are you listening?" she whispered to the heavens. "You once said that if I had courage, I could be free to make my dreams come true. But now that courage is being put to the test. *Your* test, dear friend, and you failed. And now I'm afraid I will fail, too . . ."

A creak of the door sounded behind her, and she turned to find Alex. Barefoot, the front of his shirt opened, he wedged his hands into his front pockets and approached. In the orange dusk, his tanned skin seemed to glow.

"What are you still doing out here, lass? I thought you'd gone to bed."

He came to stand beside her, and despite the cool evening, his heat radiated through the thin fabric of her sleeve. "I don't think I could sleep right now," she said.

"I'm the same." He breathed deeply as his gaze lifted toward the sky.

There was so much they still hadn't talked about. "Detective Quinn said that you were here in Gretna because of Rhymer and the mission. Does that mean you'll return to France when this is over?"

"Aye."

"I thought so."

He looked down at her. "How would you know, lass?"

"A couple of weeks ago, you'd mentioned needing to chop more wood and you worried 'they' and not 'we' would have enough for the winter."

"Well, I'm glad you pay attention to what I say." He smiled, and she thrilled at the way his expression softened, his eyes creasing at the edges.

"Of course I pay attention. Why would you doubt it?"

"I noticed you were hanging on to the lieutenant's every word at supper."

"Ah." She nodded. "Lieutenant Stuart is rather handsome *and* chivalrous, and he's been to so many exotic places around the world. I should think anyone would listen to him." She turned back to admire the sky.

"Aye, especially since *you* want to travel across the world as well. Maybe the two of you should see it together once this is all over."

Rose looked at him in surprise. She'd only been teasing. Yet he was glaring at her, his sullen features set. "Alex." She reached for his arm.

"He kisses your hand and makes love to you with his words, and right away your head's turned. I'd thought you more canny than that, especially after Dexter."

His brutal remark stung. "Do not even compare Lieutenant Stuart with him! Julien was a bully, telling me how to behave and when to speak and what to say and do." She glared back at him. "I've grown a lot stronger, Alex Baird, enough to know that I'll not let any man tell me how to live. Obedience is not a substitute for love." She swallowed past the ache in her throat. "I want this. I want . . ." She looked away from him, toward the trees now shadowed in twilight.

"What do you want, Rose?"

The warmth of his hand touched her chin as he turned her back to face him. "Tell me, lass," he said softly, his gaze searching. "Tell me and 'tis yours."

She looked up at him, her heart pumping. Each breath of air quivering in her chest. She wanted *him*, the man whose rare smiles tantalized her, whose tenderness and laughter illuminated the darkest and loneliest parts of her soul.

Even now his gentle gaze called her home, to a sense of peace and happiness she'd not known in so many years. "I want . . ." she breathed, tilting her chin so that their faces were close. "I need . . ."

"This?" he whispered, and cupping the sides of her face with his roughened hands, he pressed his lips gently against hers. "And this . . ." He leaned in then, capturing her mouth in a kiss that was warm, tender, insistent, and Rose closed her eyes, his touch sweeping her off to dizzying heights even as she remained standing with him. His hands slowly drifted from her face to graze along her neck and shoulders, and finally surround her in his embrace, his skin searing her through the cotton blouse.

She kissed him back, shyly at first, then more ardently, seeking, tasting, discovering, and a low groan sounded in his throat as she ran her hands up along his chest. The smooth heat rippled with muscle as she threaded her fingers around his neck and met his desire with her own. No longer thinking of the past or to the future but just this moment in his arms, safe and sheltered for the first time in a long, long while.

Finally he ended the kiss, his breathing heavy while she leaned her cheek against his chest, the rapid beating of his heart in her ear. They remained that way for some time until she lifted her face to him, a smile hovering at her lips. "Does this mean you like the way I dance?"

He chuckled and bent his head to kiss her again. "And more," he said when they parted.

This time Rose struggled to catch her breath. "Does it matter to you that I'm not Tilly?"

He raised a brow. "Is it just Rose?"

"Rosalind," she said. "My mum loved Shakespeare."

It was a moment before he grinned. "*As You Like It*?"

She nodded, and he sighed, pulling her close. "As I recall," he said softly against her ear, making her shiver with pleasure. "Rosalind disguised herself as a shepherd boy who escaped to the woods with her cousin and found her true love." He drew back then, kissing the tip of her nose. "Not exactly *your* story, but I'll wager closer than your mum ever could have imagined."

Dazed with happiness, she persisted in teasing him. "You haven't answered my question, Alex. Does it matter?"

His green eyes held hers. "I've fallen in love with *you*. Tilly or Rose, it matters not. You're the same lass to me, either way."

Love. She leaned against him once more, her arms encircling his waist. His heat penetrated her skin, while the faint smell of musk and leather and spice filled her senses, her whole being.

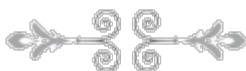
She realized she'd been dreaming to hear those words from him, to

be held in his arms, surrounded in his warmth. Feeling cherished. “Thank you,” she whispered thickly, and tightened her hold on him.

They stood beneath the twilight sky for several minutes, the silence broken only by the gentle hush of the breeze and the sounds of frogs from a nearby marsh.

“Well, lass,” he said finally, his tone gruff. “We should try to get some sleep.”

“Aye.” She looked up at him then and their eyes met, each knowing what the morning would bring. Then she rose up on tiptoe and pressed another kiss to his lips before stepping back. “Good night, Alex.”



She *did* love him . . . so why hadn't she said the words?

Rose crawled into bed a half hour later and closed her eyes, exhausted. Yet sleep evaded her, as the real world had returned and along with it, her precarious future.

In a matter of hours, she must meet with a killer, and if by God's grace she—all of them—survived tomorrow, then Alex would leave Gretna to return to France. And Rose would still be left to deal with her uncle and Julien and keeping Douglas and Samuel safe.

She couldn't forsake her dream or abandon the boys to Uncle's mercy. Nor could she remain here and expect to keep her secret, not now.

Rose still held the hope that once she'd told Detective Quinn everything, he would arrest Uncle Ridley and Julien and finally set her free. But she couldn't forget her uncle's powerful influence or that of Julien's father, the earl. And if despite the detective's efforts, her cause came to naught, she might be forced to go back to where she'd started. And Rose had vowed never to tolerate that kind of existence again.

And Alex? She touched a finger to her trembling lips, remembering his kiss and his tender declaration, “*I've fallen in love with you . . .*”

How could he help her, when he would soon be going back to the war?

Turning into her pillow, Rose let her silent tears flow unchecked. She longed to be in his arms once more, to feel the steady beating of his heart that could somehow banish the ache in her own, and with it, the dread in knowing she might have no choice at all.

And if that happened, then after tomorrow she and her brothers must

find a way to leave as soon as possible.

Even if it cost her own happiness.



He lay on the bed in his hotel room, still wearing his uniform. The orange sky had deepened to dusk through the open window, making him stir from a near catatonic state.

Slowly, he stood up, his heart resuming a steady beat. He turned on the bedside lamp and then withdrew from his tunic pocket the photograph.

He'd been glad to have the Turkish tobacco on his person once he saw that Captain Baird's father smoked a pipe. Giving him time to leave the porch on the pretense of retrieving the pouch from his truck when instead he'd walked through the house to find *her* room.

Right away he noticed his mother's brooch on her nightstand, and it took him less than a minute to discover the valise tucked beneath her bed.

"R and T—Rose and Me—Sisters of the heart we shall always be." He read the scrawled words on the back of the photograph, and then turning it over, he stared at the two women smiling into the camera lens. A summer's day, it seemed, and both looking so happy and carefree.

He grazed his thumb across the face of the woman he'd just met and considered how pleasant their evening had been. Not only was she attractive and charming but she'd been quite receptive to his attention. They all had, especially after he told them the story about watching Captain Baird and the lads play football in Edinburgh's streets.

He'd learned in his trade that most people rarely recall every detail of early childhood, and added to the fact the captain's family moved shortly afterward, had made his fabrications all the more believable.

He sneered recalling Mrs. Baird's claim that she remembered his fictional brother, Donald Stuart—a common enough name. Nearly as common as Thomas Brown.

Captain Baird had resisted his pleasantries all evening, but that was

due to his jealousy, which Thomas had fostered in order to distract him from his real purpose in being there—to see Tilly for the first time in twenty years.

He'd listened patiently while she told her story; how her parents, once drapers in Glasgow, had died when she was fourteen—along with a nameless brother who died earlier.

Thomas recalled how, at six years old, he'd watched his mother die in childbirth; four years after that his father was killed in a shipyard accident.

She'd said she had the dog only about a month, and he remembered back in early spring, having arranged with Emin to deliver Winston as a gift to his sister, once she'd been released from prison and set up with a cottage in Attenborough. The dog had been his for a time, and so Winston nearly gave him away tonight with his affections. Thomas smiled. It was fortunate the Bairds and their pretty boarder were so easily swayed by his story of the fox.

Despite her lies, Thomas appreciated her wit and sense of humor. And of course, that lovely smile. He recalled the end of her tale—about the death of her dearest friend and deciding to leave Chilwell for Gretna . . .

His throat worked as he moved his thumb to caress the face of the other young woman in the photograph. Recognizing the single dimple in her right cheek, and his own mother's look about her. Glasgow's harsh city streets and living by their wits after their father died . . . his little sister hot with fever. Thomas the "Rhymer" coming to her rescue and robbing a chemist's shop for medicine . . .

It was the accidental fire that led to his arrest. And Thomas had wondered how Tilly would survive without him, especially after Scotland Yard put him on that ship bound for hell.

Emin had found him near death and had taken him to the home of his master, Bay Kahverengi. Thomas was sixteen when the arms dealer adopted him, surrounding him with tutors, educating him, including teaching him several languages. And once his adoptive father contracted cancer, he taught Thomas the business of selling arms and how to manage his great fortune. While traveling the world together, the son learned the father's skills in business and in making new contacts.

After his father's quiet death in Paris, Thomas rose to take his place, dealing weapons to the highest bidder and increasing his profits, the ever-faithful manservant at his side.

With Emin's help, he'd found his sister after two long decades, serving time in a British prison. And what good fortune when Captain Marcus Weatherford wanted to set her free, thanks to his own carelessness.

He'd intentionally left the munitions list in his Paris apartment, along with the names Rhymer and Thomas Brown. Knowing that eventually Scotland Yard would waste precious resources interrogating hundreds of workers while *he* arranged to sabotage the next target. But Thomas had not meant to leave the numbered tag; he'd scoured every orphanage around Glasgow before finally tracing her back to Ezekiel House.

When Tilly went to work at Chilwell, his next target, he'd been both glad and dismayed. Women *did* make the best explosives runners, adept at getting them into the factory. But his sister had made a deal with Scotland Yard to trap him, forcing him to test her loyalties first.

He stared at her smiling face in the photograph. After the explosion and her unexpected death, he'd grieved. Tilly *had* been faithful to him and yet he'd refused to see her, refused to reunite with her, and then it was too late.

And then tonight, he'd thought to have his chance.

But Emin had betrayed him.

He crushed the photograph in his fist. Scotland Yard, those curs, had thought to trap him using this stranger, *Rose*, to take his sister's place.

Heat flooded his face, while gasps of rage whistled through his clenched teeth. His temples throbbed. He . . . must . . . make a trap of his own . . .

It was minutes before he leaned back onto the bed, exhausted. Looking down at the crumpled picture in his hand, he smoothed it out and then tore it in half, pocketing the face of his beloved Tilly, while he stared at the image of her impostor.

Whatever I decide, dear Rose, there is no choice but that you must die.



GRETNNA

THURSDAY, AUGUST 1

Rose drew in shallow breaths as she stared at the large factory clock mounted high on the wall—11:35 . . .

Only minutes remained. All morning long, going about her tasks at work, she'd sensed Rhymer's eyes upon her.

And not only his—Alex was also in the shadows observing her, along with several undercover policewomen and Detective Quinn, who had assured Alex that his plainclothes detectives were in place and keeping Rose in their sights.

She hadn't yet noticed the detective or the extra policewomen, except the one who passed her through the factory inspection this morning. Constable Edwards was the same policewoman who had arrived at East Fortune on Sunday to guard her.

Before leaving the cottage for work, Rose had tucked the brooch and two phony pencil devices into her thick braid and then pinned it up tight. Now that she had the devices transferred into her pocket and the brooch pinned beneath the collar of her smock, she endured the minutes of growing terror as she awaited the noon hour.

Oh, how she wanted this to be over!

Returning her attention to her girls at the vat tables, her heart bled each time they glanced up at her and smiled, so unaware of what was to come. Would they live to see tomorrow?

Hannah's hands had healed, and as she grinned across at Betty, she dug into the cordite paste, her strong arms kneading the "devil's porridge." The girls had set a new date for their tea next Sunday and planned for a football match next week and another dance . . .

She closed her eyes against her own anguish and fear. *Lord, please help us!*

“For I know the plans I have for you . . .”

Her eyes opened. The book of Jeremiah. As she glanced back at her girls, a sudden calm settled over her. For whatever reason Tilly had died in that explosion, for whatever reason the clockmaker rejected her request for a new name and drew her back to Gretna, she understood now that she *was* supposed to be here. *For them*. Acting as their welfare supervisor, even the wayward girls, standing up for their honor against Mr. Dobbs and his cronies. And now defending them against a force more devilish and determined than any union man.

Hannah and others, their very survival—everyone’s survival—depended on her.

Bending her head toward the clipboard, she prayed. Prayed for courage—not Tilly’s bravery, though it had helped, but now Rose prayed for grace from the only heavenly power able to defeat the kind of evil she was about to face. *Lord, please, I cannot do this alone.*

When she’d finished, she looked up again at their young faces. Their smiles, and the laughter they shared while laboring together to help their countrymen, renewed her strength. She *would* meet with Rhymer, glad to see him arrested and locked away for good.

She checked the factory clock again—fifteen minutes before noon. Taking her leave of the girls, Rose headed toward Gladys and her group in the Acids Room before stopping back by her office.

The typed envelope lay on her desk.

She went still, blood pounding in her ears. Had Rhymer changed his mind about their meeting time or the place?

With shaking hands, she picked up the envelope and opened it. She removed the letter—another poem.

A rose in bloom, so lovely to behold,
But for the nasty thorn that took its hold
Upon this heart to make it bleed,
As women do when they deceive.

So now ’tis time that thee must pay
And find the bombs I’ve stowed away;
One clue I’ll give, to where you seek,
It heals, it cleans, it kills, and is sweet.

Hurry, dear Rose, ’tis almost noon . . .

—Rhymer

“Miss Lockhart?”

Rose jerked around to find Hannah at the open door. "Goodness, you scared me!"

"Och, you're looking peely-wally, I can tell." The girl eyed the note in her hand. "Is something in that letter troubling you?"

Rose breathed deeply, struggling for her calm of moments ago. "Hannah, I want you and the other girls to leave the factory building at once."

Hannah's eyes widened. "What's wrong, Miss Lockhart?"

"Don't question me, just do as I say!"

The girl jumped and, teary-eyed, fled the office.

Rose reread the poem, panic gripping her. *He knew the truth!*

How had he discovered her? Rhymer spoke of *her love* making his heart bleed. Who . . . ?

"Lass, what's happened?"

Hannah had returned with Alex. He entered her office, and she rushed to him, handing him the poem.

Scanning the lines, he muttered an oath. "What the devil does this mean?"

"I don't know, but it sounds as if I broke his heart. He knows the truth about me, Alex. And this place that he's hidden the real bombs, I cannot fathom where it might be. We've less than fifteen minutes! How can we get everyone out?"

Once again, Hannah fled and then returned in less than a minute, breathless. With her were all the girls in Rose's charge. "I told you all to leave!"

Instead of flinching, Hannah set her jaw. Seeing the note in her brother's hand, she snatched it from him.

"Hannah!"

"Wait!" She turned to the girls and recited the poem, repeating the last line: "It heals, it cleans, it kills, and is sweet."

"The chemists' room!" Gladys shouted, and Jane, Sarah, and Dorothy all bobbed their heads. "The bloke's talking about glycerin. It heals—they use it in burn salves. An' it cleans—it's in our soaps and face creams. It kills when we use it to make cordite, an' glycerin has a sweet taste." She looked at Rose. "An' it's kept with the chemists. They cook it in with the acids to make nitroglycerin."

"Blimey!" Betty cried. "This Rhymer's plannin' to blow up our factory?"

Alex was already running toward the chemists' room.

"You girls leave now!" Rose ordered before she rushed after Alex.

She'd passed beneath the overhead sign NITROGLYCERIN SECTION when she turned to look behind her and saw all her girls in fast pursuit, along with Detective Quinn.

"We want tae 'elp ye search," Colleen called out when they caught up with Rose.

"Where's Alex?" Detective Quinn looked pale as his gaze searched the area.

"In the chemists' room by now," Rose answered. "Hurry and follow me!"

They were about to enter the room when she glanced up to see Lieutenant Stuart. Clad in a constable's uniform, he was about to turn the corner into the area of the cordite vats when he paused to stare back at her, a strange light in his eyes.

"Effendi, no!" Detective Quinn rushed after him while Rose and the girls burst into the chemists' room.

"Over here!"

Alex lay on the floor, his leg pinned beneath a large lead canister. Quickly the girls worked together to free him, and he struggled to his feet. "I saw him doing something over there."

He led them to a stack of glycerin stores, and with all of them searching it took under two minutes before Alex had produced two pencil bombs. "These look as if they've been detonated." He glanced behind Rose and the girls toward the door. "Have you seen Quinn?"

"He's following Lieutenant Stuart toward the cordite vats," Rose said.

"I'll go after them." He handed her the pencil bombs. "Take these outside and throw them into the cooling pond beyond the track." He clasped her arms, his features anxious. "Run, lass! I dinna ken when those will go off."

For an instant, Rose thought he might kiss her. Instead, he let her go and stepped back. She turned to Hannah and the others. "Come, girls! There's no time to lose!"

Leaving the chemists' room, Rose soon found herself carried on a wave by her eight charges as they held her aloft, her feet barely touching the floor while they rushed her toward the double doors of the factory entrance.

When a policeman stepped forward and tried to barricade their progress, she called to him, "Please, we've got the bombs—let us through!"

Immediately he cleared a path, and the girls didn't pause as they ran with her, passing the train platform and dozens of curious onlookers,

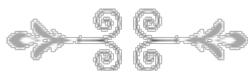
then across the railroad tracks to the cooling pond, where they promptly tossed her in along with the bombs.

“Saints above, not Miss Lockhart!” Colleen cried breathlessly, running up after them. “Just the bombs!”

Quickly she and the others waded in to fetch Rose out of the water.

“We’re sorry, Miss Lockhart,” Colleen called from behind while the girls quickly retraced their steps toward the factory. As they half carried a wet and bedraggled Rose along, they passed by the train platform once more. “Ye’ll surely be wantin’ that bath now.”

She turned to Colleen, the girl’s sallow face all earnestness and concern. Suddenly Rose couldn’t help herself. Relieved after days of tension and fear, worry and excitement, she began to laugh. Soon all her girls were laughing with her, their sides aching by the time they got back inside, then headed toward the changing room to clean up.



Alex followed in Quinn’s direction, running as fast as his legs would take him. They couldn’t lose Rhymer, not this time! And sweet heaven, not in the area of the cordite vats!

Please, God, let Stuart and Quinn have caught him! There had been no time to alert the detectives still waiting in the cotton stores.

Rhymer obviously planned this diversion. How had he discovered the truth about Rose? Or had he known all along and played Scotland Yard the whole time?

His mind raced as fast as his feet. He didn’t want to think of what would happen if Rhymer intended to set off another explosion . . .

Turning the corner, Alex glimpsed the vats—and saw only Quinn and Stuart.

Confused, he paused and scanned the area. There was no one else.

“Effendi, please! Do not do this!”

Quinn’s voice, but he sounded different. Then Alex stared in horror as Stuart, disguised as a constable, held an open lighter over a full vat of devil’s porridge. If he struck the flint . . .

No! Alex tried to rush past Quinn, but the detective grabbed his arm to hold him back.

“Effendi. Thomas, listen, you do not want to do this,” Quinn pleaded with Stuart.

Stunned to realize he was facing their saboteur, Alex watched

Stuart's handsome features contort with rage. "Emin, you betrayed me!" He spat the words. "Those hounds at Scotland Yard, they have poisoned your mind against me. I trusted you!"

"I can explain if you give me the lighter." Quinn's calm voice rose above the factory noise. "It was all a mistake. You are not a killer."

"You lied about my sister. She is dead, and you put that pretender in her place to try to trap me!"

"I did not know Tilly was dead until Sunday, Effendi. She died because of the explosion at Chilwell. Your timed bombs . . . they killed her."

"My bombs?" His lips pulled back in a savage snarl. "Again you lie! I cannot forgive you, Emin."

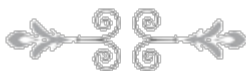
As he spoke, Stuart struck the flint, and Quinn rushed him just as the lighter dropped into the vat, before the detective wrestled him to the floor.

Realizing what was about to happen, Alex ran in the opposite direction, falling hard against the concrete as the blast reverberated past him through the factory. Acrid smoke blew through the air, filling his lungs as he struggled to sit up. He glanced back to see flaming globs of cordite flying in every direction, including over the screaming men still tussling on the factory floor.

Dear God, no! Alex struggled to his feet and donned his gloves as he ran back toward the two burning men. His last haunting memory of Ian flooded him as he reached in to grab hold of a man's pant leg—not certain which man—and pulled with all his strength.

Detective Quinn soon emerged from the inferno, unconscious and severely burned. Alex smothered the remaining fire on him, then rushed back after Stuart—but he was far too late.

By now, several male workers had rushed into the area, carrying sacks of sand to extinguish the flames. Alarms blared, while others shouted orders to evacuate the remaining workers from the section. As orderlies arrived with stretchers, Alex took off at a run, his thoughts only on Rose. Had she succeeded? *Please, God, let her be safe!*



Dear Lord, is Alex safe?

Rose huddled with her girls, still wet, shivering, and smelling of the cooling pond as they stood with hundreds of other workers a half mile

from the factory building. Their escorts, several of the uniformed Women's Police Force, had corralled them a safe distance away, where they awaited the all-clear signal from those inside.

She and her charges had been about to enter the changing room when the explosion sounded. Moments later, an alarm had blared as male workers and police began running toward the nitroglycerin section of the factory.

Rose stood tense, her humor of minutes ago vanished. She gazed at her girls, all of them looking frightened, some holding hands as they waited for news.

A weepy-eyed Hannah stood trembling beside her, and Rose pulled her close. "All will be well, lass," she said softly, though she wasn't certain at all. If anything happened to Alex . . .

Half an hour passed before a lone figure approached.

"'Tis my brother!"

Hannah turned, her face suddenly radiant, while Rose blinked back tears. She managed to squeeze the girl's hand. *Lord, thank you.*

"The fire's been contained," Alex called out to them. "You should be able to return inside in a few minutes."

As he cut through the crowd to reach her and the girls, Rose noticed he looked the worse for wear. With his face red and his clothing singed, he was covered in the acrid dust. *And he is alive!*

Once he was beside them, his eyes searched hers. "What happened to you?"

Rose shivered in response, and he removed his singed coat, placing it around her shoulders. "My g-girls did a fine job getting the b-bombs into the pond."

"And you as well, it looks like."

She hoped he might hold her, but then his sister launched at him, wrapping her arms around his neck. "Alex, I'm so glad you're still with us!"

Grinning, he gave her a bear hug, then he reached out a hand to Rose, and she clasped it tightly, meeting his eyes.

Once Hannah had released him, Rose asked, "Where are Detective Quinn and Lieutenant Stuart?"

"Quinn's in the factory infirmary. He's unconscious and suffered severe burns."

Rose drew in a breath. Would the detective die? "And . . . the lieutenant?"

"He didna survive the flames." He leaned in to add in a low voice,

"I'm not certain, but I believe he was our man."

Her eyes widened. "You mean . . . Rhymer?"

"Aye." He grimaced. "His visit last night would explain how he realized you were not his sister, especially if he'd already seen her at Chilwell. So instead, he made fools of us all."

A whistle blew in the distance, and the policewomen began shepherding everyone back toward the factory. As Rose walked beside Alex, her skin grew chill, though not from the dampness but in remembering how Lieutenant Stuart had charmed her and laughed with her last evening. She cringed recalling the way he'd kissed her hand—a sensation now reptilian to her, considering he'd been plotting her murder and everyone else's while he wooed her.

And poor Detective Quinn! While she'd feared him as her uncle's "sheepdog" Luther, in truth he'd been helping her friend and was compassionate toward Rose in her day-to-day struggles at Leicester. In her mind, since their meeting on Sunday he'd become her champion, a man she knew she could trust.

Now, as he struggled for his life, she grieved for him and for herself. Because if he died . . .

Any hope that she might be able to remain in Britain, and any possibility of a future with Alex—would be lost.

**EAST FORTUNE****FRIDAY, AUGUST 2**

Quinn's dead?" Alex said.

Weatherford nodded from behind the desk in Colonel Landon's East Fortune office. Yesterday after the explosion, Alex had contacted the captain in London, and he'd taken the first train north, spending the night in Gretna's infirmary with the dying detective.

"I stayed with him until the last," he added, his gaze somber.

Alex glanced at Rose, seated in the chair beside his own across from the desk. Her blue eyes welled with grief. "I'm sorry, lass," he said gently and reached to squeeze her hand. "I ken that you two had some history together."

She nodded and gave him a watery smile.

"Before he died, he told me quite a story," Weatherford continued, drawing their attention. "In fact, I still find it hard to believe."

Alex leaned forward. "What did he say?"

"I should start by telling you that Quinn had many faces." He glanced at Rose. "You know that he was Miles Luther, your uncle's chauffeur, and acting as Tilly's contact at Chilwell. He was also Quinn, the plainclothes detective with Scotland Yard's Special Branch whom I took with me to the prison to meet Miss Lockhart." He paused, eyeing them both. "And he was Emin Tabak, manservant to the arms dealer, Didymos Kahverengi."

"Ah, Thomas Brown."

Weatherford rose to his feet as all eyes turned to Colonel Landon, who had suddenly reappeared and stepped into his office.

"As you were, Captain. Excuse the intrusion." The colonel reached for a file on a table beside the door and was about to leave when Weatherford stopped him. "Colonel, why did you say 'Thomas

Brown’?”

Colonel Landon’s salt-and-pepper brows drew together. “Early on in the war, Captain, before I trained as a pilot and received this post, I served in the BEF. We fought that bloody battle at Gallipoli against the Ottoman Empire, and while I was there, I picked up a bit of Turk. *Kahverengi* is their word for the color brown.”

“And Didymos . . .” Weatherford paused, a smile in his voice. “The Bible, of course. Our doubting Thomas.”

“Righto.” The colonel nodded toward Alex and Rose, then slipped from the room.

“That would fit with what Quinn . . . Emin Tabak told me,” Weatherford said once the colonel had left.

Alex and Rose listened as he then explained how the manservant found Thomas Lockhart half dead in the Australian bush and took him to his master, Bay Kahverengi, who adopted the boy and taught him the arms-dealing business. Thomas took over after Kahverengi’s death and continued to amass his fortune.

“It also explains why the name Thomas Brown was on the munitions list the French found in the Paris apartment,” Weatherford said. “I began to suspect Kahverengi was wasting Scotland Yard’s time and resources by offering up the common name as a decoy. Emin told me Thomas never forgave the bobbies for sending him off to that hellish boys’ farm.

“He also confirmed that Kahverengi contracted with the Germans to destroy several British munition factories. The Huns’ last desperate attempt to gain the upper hand in the war.”

“Excuse me, Captain,” Rose said, edging forward in her seat, “but I’m a bit confused. We already know that Tilly’s brother, Thomas Lockhart, was Rhymer . . . but you’re saying he’s also Thomas Brown *and* this Kahverengi fellow?”

“That’s correct, Miss Graham. Like his adopted father, Thomas Brown became a master of disguise, making it impossible for us to pin him down.”

“What about Lieutenant Stuart?” She glanced at Alex. “He tried to blow up the factory.”

“Again, Thomas Brown.” Weatherford opened a file on the desk. “I received a telegram this morning from Scotland Yard. The body of one Lieutenant Charles Stuart was recently found floating in the Thames.” He looked up, his expression grim. “Brown eliminated the lieutenant so that he could pose in his place as our MI5 liaison to Captain Baird.”

Alex fell back against his seat. "Because he found out through Quinn—Emin—that I'd be working at Moorside to find Rhymer."

"Indeed." Weatherford's tanned face tinged with color. "I'm afraid that he fooled even me, Alex. With all my efforts at secrecy, even to the point of withholding information from you, Quinn was privy to all."

"Did he tell Rhymer . . . Stuart . . . the truth about me?" Rose asked softly.

"No, lass," Alex said, gazing at her. "Just before the explosion I heard Stuart accuse him of betrayal because he'd kept your identity secret."

"When Quinn met you, Miss Graham, and you agreed to take Tilly's place, he made the decision to hide your identity from his master," Weatherford said. "He, too, hoped to put an end to the killings."

Rose frowned. "But then Lieutenant Stuart . . . Rhymer . . . met me at the Bairds the night before and must have realized I wasn't his sister."

"We found a torn piece of a photograph in his room at the Gretna Hotel." Weatherford slid a wrinkled snapshot toward Rose.

"It's a picture of me at Chilwell." She turned to Alex. "He must have taken this from my room while we were out on the back porch! Tilly was in the other half of the photo. He obviously recognized her and knew he'd been betrayed."

"I'm just thankful Quinn . . . Emin had a change of heart," Weatherford said. "Miss Lockhart's death at Chilwell shook him."

"He was certainly shocked when he came into this office and saw me instead of her," Rose said. "No doubt he'd held the hope she somehow escaped."

Weatherford nodded. "He told me that he felt responsible for her death."

"Why?" she asked. "I know he cared for her very much. I think he loved her."

Alex noticed that as she spoke, Rose avoided his gaze. When he'd declared his love to her the other night, she hadn't responded in kind. Yet her passion when they'd kissed had revealed to him how much she cared. But did she love him?

"You are right, Miss Graham, he was in love with her," Weatherford said. "When Tilly received the package with the bombs, she hadn't yet identified Rhymer. Because Quinn wanted to ensure she received her pardon, he urged her to go through with the meeting in the Mixing House that night. His hope was that once she'd fulfilled her part of our deal, she would then be free to leave and go to Canada, far away from Thomas."

“But instead of being free, she died,” Rose whispered.

“Yes.” Weatherford sighed. “Quinn told me last night that he hadn’t expected Rhymer’s bombs to go off so soon. He thought she’d be safe.”

“Are you saying he knew for certain Rhymer set his own explosives at Chilwell? When Alex and I spoke with him, he only suggested the possibility.”

“Wait.” Alex sat forward as her words triggered a memory—an exchange between Stuart and Quinn just before the cordite vat exploded. “I heard Quinn accuse Stuart of placing the bombs, but Stuart seemed surprised and called him a liar.”

Rose turned to him. “You mean the explosion could simply have been an accident?”

“It’s possible.” Weatherford spoke up. “Scotland Yard investigated the Chilwell site for weeks and found no solid evidence to prove the blast was caused by sabotage. And the lead coating on the pencil bomb leaves no trace, so we may never know the truth.”

“How was it that Quinn . . . Emin went with you to the prison to see Tilly in the first place, Captain?” Alex asked. “Did he know she was there?”

Weatherford nodded. “The French had also found in Kahverengi’s Paris flat a numbered tag from an orphanage in Glasgow. They sent it to London, and I had Scotland Yard track it down. That’s how we found Tilly Lockhart.” He sighed. “But Kahverengi had already located her and installed Emin in Scotland Yard—who knows how he did it—and because as Quinn he was already assigned to the case, I kept him on.”

“And likely the deal you made with Tilly saved Quinn the trouble of breaking her out of prison.”

“It would seem so,” Weatherford said. “Just like his employer, Quinn was highly skilled in deception—he managed to fool Scotland Yard, and that is quite a feat.”

“Did Kahverengi have other women helping him with the earlier factory explosions?”

Weatherford’s dark eyes studied him. “I asked Emin that question. He told me the female plant they’d used at Barstow and Linworth died in the last explosion.” He paused. “Apparently, Olivia Charles is no longer a problem.”

Alex launched from his seat, ignoring Rose’s gasp. “That witch is dead?”

“From Emin Tabak’s own lips.”

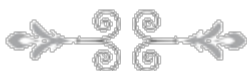
Alex heaved a sigh. “Well, I canna say I’m sorry.”

“Alex?” Rose eyed him with concern.

“’Tis all right, lass. The woman was an enemy agent who tried to lead my brother down the wrong path. I would have rather she faced a trial and a firing squad, but it seems justice has been served.”

She looked as if to question him further, then changed her mind, much to his relief.

“In any case,” Weatherford continued briskly, closing the file on the desk, “Thomas Brown and all his aliases are no more. And while Emin’s confession would have provided the proof needed to convict our saboteur, Rhymer died by his own brand of poison.”



Rose had listened throughout as Captain Weatherford and Alex worked to unravel the enigma surrounding Thomas Brown *and* Emin . . . her friend, Detective Quinn. Both men whose lives had been rampant with secrets and bad deeds.

Her heart also grieved for Tilly and the memory of her horrible death. Yet Rose was proud, too. Her friend had been truly brave, especially that last day at Chilwell.

“I’m glad Tilly Lockhart has been exonerated in all of this.” She gazed at both men. “She sought only peace and an end to the killing, and she died trying to accomplish that.” Her lower lip began to quiver. “She’s the true hero of this tale.”

Alex laid a hand on her shoulder, and his warm touch brought her comfort. She no longer knew what the future held for her, but with God’s grace and Tilly’s example she would face whatever was to come. Even Julien.

“You, too, are heroic, Miss Graham,” Captain Weatherford said. “Despite great personal risk, you chose to help us in our effort to catch Rhymer. That took no little amount of courage.”

Reaching into his breast pocket, he withdrew an envelope and handed it over to her. “I know about your difficult circumstances in Leicester, and you’ll find a cheque inside from the War Office for any expenses you might accrue in the future.”

Rose stared at him in surprise, before she peered inside at the amount and drew a sharp breath. It was more than enough to purchase passage for herself and her brothers on a ship to Nova Scotia, along with ample seed money for her dress shop. “Thank you, Captain.”

Somewhat dazed, she turned to Alex. His features were like stone. Again the thought of leaving him and his family, leaving her girls at the factory, made her ache. But what else could she do? Detective Quinn was dead, and even if he wasn't, he could never have helped her.

"I suppose now you'll be sailing off on your ship to 'New Scotland.' Your fresh start?"

The edge in his voice pained her. "Alex—"

"'New Scotland,' Miss Graham?"

Captain Weatherford eyed her curiously.

"Nova Scotia, in Canada," she explained.

His dark brows veed together as he glanced at Alex then back at her. "If I may ask, why so far away?"

She moistened her lips, turning her eyes back toward Alex. "Because I have no choice," she said in low voice. "My brothers . . . will be in danger . . ."

"What kind of danger, Miss Graham?" Captain Weatherford had leaned forward.

"I must get them away from my uncle. And Julien Dexter."

"That scunner." Alex snarled. "What's he got to do with your brothers?"

Captain Weatherford looked keen. "Yes, please explain, Miss Graham."

She raised her chin, her pulse pounding. "I'll first need your promise, Captain, that you'll protect Douglas and Samuel."

The captain frowned while Alex spoke gently beside her. "Tell us why, Rose."

She turned to him. "I told you before that if Julien discovered I was alive, he would have taken me back to Leicester. I also told you my uncle arranged the marriage." She paused. "But what I didn't say was that Uncle threatened to ship my brothers to an overseas orphanage if I didn't marry Julien and keep silent about what I'd seen."

"What did you see?" Captain Weatherford demanded.

Rose compressed her lips and he softened his tone. "Pardon me, Miss Graham. The answer is yes, I will see that your brothers are protected."

The tightness in her chest suddenly eased. "I happened upon Uncle Ridley and Julien in my uncle's library two months ago, where I witnessed . . . an exchange." She looked down at her lap, her mind replaying the scene. "Julien had given him documents. I don't know what they contained, but my uncle thought them important enough to

unlock the hidden compartment in his desk.”

She glanced up. “It attaches behind the center drawer. You must pull out the drawer almost entirely in order to reach the hidden lock. He put Julien’s documents inside, then went to his safe and withdrew a packet of company stock and banknotes and gave both to him. I tried retracing my steps, but Uncle saw me. Suddenly the wedding was moved up, and he threatened me with Douglas and Samuel’s lives.”

“If the documents in that compartment are what I think they are, Miss Graham, I believe we can make an arrest.” The captain’s eyes gleamed. “I’ll wager Dexter sold your uncle secret munitions information he’d obtained from his father’s files.

“We’ve suspected a government leak for some time, and it was the reason I sent Dexter to Gretna. French reports revealed the lieutenant had an alleged connection to Kahverengi. We hoped Dexter’s presence in Gretna would draw out his agent, Rhymer.” He snorted. “And Quinn was in on that too, playing both sides. He confessed last night that Kahverengi went in as the photographer, giving our saboteur a firsthand look at the factory.”

“Holden!” Alex fell back against his seat once more. “The man spoke maybe half a dozen words during the tour, and he kept himself busy behind the camera.”

“The art of disguise,” the captain agreed.

“So much intrigue.” Rose shook her head. “It’s a miracle we survived through all of Rhymer’s scheming and double-crossing.”

“Indeed, Miss Graham.” The captain smiled. “And you were the most unexpected twist of all. To his detriment and to our benefit.”

She ducked her head at his praise before turning to Alex. “I never wanted to keep secrets from you,” she said. “But I’ve already caused Douglas and Samuel enough grief and I couldn’t risk telling anyone about this until I knew that I could protect them from my uncle.” She reached for his hand. “And I never planned to take Tilly’s place, but I hope now you understand why I did. It seemed as though God had intervened to help me.”

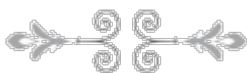
He enfolded her hand into his larger one. “I think He did, lass.” He glanced toward the desk. “And so does Captain Weatherford. The man’s as good as his word, so you can trust him.”

“We just need a way to get into that hidden compartment.” Captain Weatherford rose to his feet, his fingers combing his mustache. “We need to get our hands on the proof before we can prosecute.”

“I would imagine my aunt knows where he keeps the key.” When he

paused and turned to her, Rose smiled and said, “And I’m certain she would probably unlock it *for* you.”

His mouth broadened. “From what I’ve heard, Miss Graham, I think you’re right.”



Weatherford looked as if he might crow.

Alex gazed at the remarkable woman beside him and then at their joined hands. Rose had taken a chance opportunity to escape her circumstances and had sacrificed much in the process.

He’d seen the hunger in her face many times as he and his family expressed their love for one another, especially when Fergus and James laughed and chased her wee dog around the yard. He understood now how much it must have hurt denying herself the remaining fragment of a loving family.

He was glad his own clan loved her and had embraced her presence at the house, though again he wondered what was in her heart and her future. Maybe she’d been too afraid to declare her feelings for him, believing she had no other choice than to flee once more.

Which now left Alex longing to know . . . if after the arrests were made and her future was secure, would she still choose to leave?



LONDON

MONDAY, AUGUST 5

In a few hours, she would finally see Douglas and Samuel.

Fear and excitement rippled through Rose as she strolled with Alex beneath a canopy of trees heading toward McCrory's Tea Shop in London's Highbury District.

When Alex had asked to accompany her on Saturday's train into the city, she welcomed his support and his offer to help collect her brothers from Caldicott School.

The tea shop was just a short walking distance from the Forresters' house, where Alex's friends, Simon and Eve, had offered them a place to stay the past two nights.

The midmorning breeze ruffled the leaves on the trees overhead and carried the faint scent of roses. The Forresters would follow them along to the tea shop once baby Zoe had been fed and put down for her nap under the watchful eye of Mrs. Kerr, their housekeeper.

"Are you nervous, lass?"

She glanced at Alex and realized she was clutching his arm as they walked. She tried to loosen her grip, but he held her fast and smiled. "Dinna fash, all will be well."

"I wish I could share your confidence." She sighed. "I've been trying to imagine the reunion with my brothers, certain my sudden appearance from the dead will come as a shock. Do you think they'll understand the reasons for my actions?"

"I canna say." He bowed his head. "Not when you consider my own poor reaction to the truth." He paused. "Though Eve and Simon had a difficult reunion when they were in Belgium, and she told me after that it was God's love that bound their wounds and brought her hope back to life. I believe it will do the same for you and the lads."

She smiled. "You have wonderful friends, Alex. I'm grateful they've made a place for us, and with having a newborn in the house as well."

He chuckled. "I enjoy watching Simon with his wee bairn. The way he looks done-in when morning comes, and he's been up and down with her all night. My goddaughter is exacting my revenge on her da for his keeping secrets from me."

Rose gave him an arched look. "I kept secrets."

"Aye, but you're a bonny lass and he's not." Gazing at her, he placed his hand over hers in the crook of his elbow. "I ken the reasons now why you had to hide from Dexter and your uncle." He shrugged. "And I dinna hold a grudge with my friend. 'Twas probably best at the time he and Weatherford withheld the fact Tilly Lockhart was Rhymer's sister."

"Yes, I imagine you would have kicked me out the door."

His bronzed face held the hint of color. "And I never would have discovered Rhymer or the truth about lovely Rose Graham."

It was her turn to blush, and she averted her eyes and spied the tea shop. "Shall we sit outside while we wait for the Forresters?"

He led her to an outdoor table on the patio, and taking their seats, they ordered tea and scones. Rose checked her watch. "Do you think Captain Weatherford has arrived in Leicester by now?"

"Aye. He'll move in on the estate once your uncle's left the house."

His words quickened her pulse. She'd told them her uncle attended his afternoon board meetings in Sheffield, the first Monday of each month.

"Hopefully, your aunt will still help?" he asked.

"I believe she will. He's made her life a purgatory." Her worried gaze eyed him across the table. "But what about Julien? When will he be apprehended?"

"It canna happen soon enough to suit me."

Alex had opened up to her on the train about Olivia Charles and his reasons for bitterness toward the woman and Julien. Her former fiancé had corrupted Alex's brother and put him into the path of that "viper."

While he didn't elaborate, Rose sensed there was more to the story, but she didn't press him. It was enough that he'd trusted her with the truth, and after their meeting with Captain Weatherford last Thursday, Alex had warmed to her again, leaving her more torn about her decision to say good-bye and sail across an ocean to New Scotland.

He reached across the table to take her hand. "To answer your question, once Weatherford has the proof, Scotland Yard will arrest your uncle and get his confession to prosecute Dexter."

“What if my uncle won’t confess?”

“I doubt Sir Cutler will shoulder all of the responsibility.” He made a wry face. “From what you’ve told me about your uncle, he’ll use what he knows to barter a deal. The Earl of Stanton would not wish a public scandal.”

A shaft of panic pierced her. “You mean Julien and my uncle could go free?”

He squeezed her hand. “Treason’s a serious charge, and at best they’ll be sent off to some obscure prison to wait out the war.” His tone softened. “Once their secret’s out, the threat to you and your brothers is gone. They canna harm you.”

She offered a smile. “You make a very persuasive argument, Captain Baird.”

He chuckled. “So long as I convince you to relax.”

“Hello there, Alex and Rose!”

Rose turned to see the Forresters hailing them.

“They made fast time,” Alex said, and moved to sit beside her as Simon and Eve joined them at the small table. A young woman appeared moments later with Alex’s coffee and a pot of Earl Grey for Rose and the others.

Eve inhaled deeply the fragrant morning air. “The babe is napping, and I’ve an entire hour to enjoy elevenses.” She reached to pour herself a cup of tea. “I’m famished.”

“We’ve ordered a plate of ration scones and gingerbread cup puddings,” Rose said.

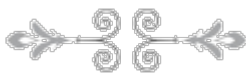
“Ah yes, the war continues to intrude on daily life.” Still, she smiled as she turned to her husband. “Remember how we enjoyed strawberry biscuits and Darjeeling tea in this very place?”

“And I worked up the courage to ask you for your hand?” Simon winked at her.

Rose smiled at Eve. “Simon proposed to you . . . here?”

“He did, though I made him wait a moment or two for an answer.”

“More like she aged me a few years.” Simon grinned. “But once she said yes, we never looked back.”



Alex saw the love between his two friends, and his chest tightened. He thought of his own parents and their deep affection for each other,

and he longed to have that same kind of happiness. He was ready to settle down and prayed for the day when he could start rebuilding his life, put the war and his painful past behind him, and embrace the future. *To forgive and be forgiven* . . .

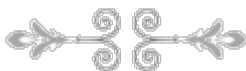
He gazed at Rose, and a light pink color dusted her cheeks. Again he dared to hope that once the threat was over, she'd change her mind and stay.

"What time will you go to the school, Rose?" Eve asked.

Rose turned to her. "Captain Weatherford said that after they have my uncle in custody, he will telephone your home. Alex and I will leave for Caldicott once that happens."

She turned to him, apprehension in her eyes.

Yet there was nothing more he could say to comfort her. And so he reached for her hand on the table, pleased when she twined her fingers with his. "And so we wait, lass."



"Stop here."

Spying the tea shop, Julien halted the cabby on Crossley Street.

He'd just fulfilled his duty delivering army dispatches from Paris to General Howard, who was supposed to be on furlough at his home in Highbury, and now he was hungry. It was near to noon, and lunch would be just the thing before stopping back at the War Office for dispatches bound for Paris.

Why hadn't he heard from Kahverengi? Two weeks had passed since they met at Cimetière du Calvaire in Paris, though thanks to Percy's intrusion Julien had had nothing to offer the arms dealer.

He was glad now he hadn't cut off his arrangement with Cutler. In the event Kahverengi had taken umbrage over their last meeting, Julien still had the means to accrue a fortune.

Perhaps his friend was in Monte Carlo where he enjoyed spending time, or simply at work on another arms deal in some other country. It was just as well. Julien had tried twice to get into his father's study for the files, but between Percy's unexpected forays downstairs and the servants crawling all over the house, his timing was off.

Aggravation began to gnaw at him. He'd telephoned Cutler after last Tuesday's failure, and the man was keen to get more information and pay handsomely in stocks and currency. Julien had to find a way to get

back to London tomorrow afternoon to ensure he would be successful.

Stepping from the cab, he paid the driver and walked toward the tea shop, the hot sun making his skin itch beneath the uniform.

What would he do after the war? Munitions would certainly drop in production and so he'd already decided to sell all his shares at the first breath of peace being settled. He'd buy himself a fine town house in London, and when the old man kicked off, he'd be there to take care of Percy. Perhaps he'd find an heiress to marry, someone with as much money as Cutler . . .

He'd started around the corner to enter the tea shop when he halted.

A foursome sat outdoors in the shade, and while he wasn't familiar with the couple facing him—a uniformed RAF captain and a beautiful woman sitting beside him—he focused instead on the broad back of the tall man seated across from her.

“And so we wait, lass.”

That voice with the familiar Scots burr belonged to Alex Baird. Startled, Julien stepped back and then smirked. How was it he kept running into Ian Baird's older brother? And why was he in London?

Perhaps I'll go and say hello. His grin widened as he imagined the shock on the captain's face to see him so soon after Moorside.

The slender woman in a small straw hat beside him abruptly turned to Baird, showing her full profile. Julien froze. *Cutler's niece?*

He shook off the ridiculous notion, until she spoke: “I hope Douglas and Samuel will forgive me.” The soft traces of an English education mangled with Scots.

Julien slowly retreated until he'd entered the back of the tea shop and then demanded to use a telephone. He rang up the man who could change his fortune, and after his assurance to make the arrangements, Julien hailed another cab, this time to a new destination and the promise of riches.



It was midafternoon when Rose and Alex arrived in front of the green lawns and adjacent woodlands shading the redbrick façade of Hertfordshire's Caldicott School.

Her nerves taut over the upcoming reunion with her brothers, Rose gripped Alex's arm once they exited the cab. "Trust in God's love, Rose," Alex whispered and squeezed her hand as they started toward the front steps of the building to arrive at the main office.

Reaching the porch, she breathed deeply and gazed up at him as they walked inside.

"Good afternoon, how may I help you?"

A middle-aged woman, her hair cinched into a high bun, smiled pleasantly as she left her chair behind the desk near the door. Rose surveyed the spacious front room, the pale walls and continuous oak wainscoting broken only by a door beside the polished banister leading upstairs.

"I'm here to see Douglas and Samuel Graham," she said quietly and wondered if this was the same person who had answered her previous calls.

The woman frowned. "The Graham boys?"

"Yes, I'm their sister, Rose Graham."

"Surely not." Her eyes narrowed. "That young woman passed away last month in the Midlands accident."

How could she explain? She squared her shoulders and lifted her chin. "I am indeed Rose Graham, and if you'll kindly send for my brothers, they can confirm my claim."

The woman's pinched mouth lasted several seconds. "I must speak with our interim headmaster, Mr. Valmont," she said at length. "Please wait here."

She indicated a hardwood bench in the foyer, then went to knock on the door near the stairs.

Rose took a seat while Alex stood. "I confess, I didn't take time to consider that the rest of the world still believes me dead," she whispered.

"The lads will settle the issue quick enough. And now that your uncle is in custody, 'tis only a matter of time before Dexter joins him." He reached out and cupped the side of her face, his eyes glowing with promise. "They canna hurt you now."

She leaned into his touch, reassured by his presence and his words. It was still hard to believe that she and the boys would soon be free . . .

"Miss Graham, is it?"

Rose and Alex turned to see a distinguished gentleman approach from the opened door, his reddish-gray brows veed in concern. "My secretary tells me you're here to see Douglas and Samuel Graham?"

"Yes, Headmaster. If you'll send for them, we can clear up this matter. I've come to take them home."

His aged expression looked dubious. "Regardless of who you are, the boys have already gone."

Rose gasped. "What do you mean 'gone'?"

"I received a telephone call at the noon hour from their guardian, Sir Ridley Cutler. He instructed us to allow the boys an escort home with Lieutenant Dexter."

"No!" Rose grabbed for Alex.

"When was the lieutenant here?" Alex demanded.

The headmaster seemed shaken. "He . . . left two hours ago."

"And he was taking them to Leicester?"

"I would assume so, sir."

Alex glanced at the headmaster's secretary. "May I use your telephone?"

The woman nodded, and soon Rose heard him put a call through to Simon in London. "Aye, I'll hold," he said once he'd apprised the captain of the situation.

He held the receiver to his ear as he eyed Rose. "Eve overheard Simon's side of the conversation and told him she saw someone. She's got sharp eyes."

Simon must have come back on the line. "Can she describe him?" Alex nodded at Rose, and her heart began hammering in her chest. Then seeing his fierce look, she knew it was Julien that Eve had seen. "That explains it. He's got a place in London? You have an address?"

Another moment of silence. "Thanks, pal. See you there."

"We're going back into the city," Alex said once he'd rung off.

“Scotland Yard is still at your uncle’s estate, going through his records. If Dexter went there first, he wouldna risk going near the place with so many police. Likely he’s taken the lads to his family’s town house at St. James.”

They quickly left the stunned headmaster and his secretary and returned to the waiting cab. Alex gave the driver Stanton’s address.

As the vehicle rumbled back toward the city, he put his arm around her. “We’ll be there in less than an hour, lass. Hold tight.”

Rose looked up at him. “How did he find us?”

“Eve saw a man in an RAF uniform walking toward the tea shop. She described him and said she remembered because he came to a sudden halt a few feet away, and his face turned white. He began a slow retreat, then disappeared around to the back of the shop.” He pulled her close. “Obviously Dexter recognized you *and* me, and if he overheard any of our conversation, he made a telephone call to your uncle and was told to fetch the lads.”

She leaned against him. “I pray you’re right, Alex.”

“Do they know Dexter?”

She nodded against his shoulder. “They met him last Christmas.”

“Then they willna be afraid of him.” His deep voice held a confidence that gave her hope. “And Dexter’s a schemer, but he wouldna dare bring harm to them.”

Over the next forty minutes, however, and despite Alex’s reassurances, Rose trembled as her mind conjured the scenarios she’d feared for months.

What if Julien wasn’t in London? Perhaps Uncle instructed him to take them to Liverpool and put them on a ship bound for the Americas, or Spain, or even Australia, where Tilly’s brother suffered! *Lord, please let me find them!*

She found a reprieve from her frightening thoughts as the cab pulled up in front of a three-story brownstone near London’s St. James Square. As she and Alex quickly exited the vehicle, she gazed across the street to see Simon standing beside a dark car, and she assumed he’d brought along detectives from Scotland Yard.

He nodded to her before she and Alex mounted the steps and rang the bell.

An ancient butler answered the door, his wizened face looking harried.

“Take me to Lieutenant Dexter,” Alex ordered.

“Who’s there, Ames? Tell them to go away.”

“Tell his lordliness that we’re not leaving.”

The frightened butler tried closing the door, but Alex gave the heavy wood a swift push, nearly knocking the reedy man to the floor. “Come on,” he said and turned to grab Rose by the hand as they barged inside.

Behind them, the butler shouted in a puny voice, “You will stop, sir!”

“Ames, what is going on?” Julien strode into the foyer and abruptly halted. “Captain Baird, what brings you to my father’s house?”

“Bring out the Graham lads, Dexter.”

Julien raised an arrogant brow. “They’re safe enough for the moment. Besides, I have permission from their guardian.”

He glanced at Rose next. “That was some trick, my dear. Imagine my surprise seeing you in Highbury, come back from the grave. I’d love to know how you managed it.” His smile made her skin crawl. “Still, it’s not too late for us. I can forgive you, and we can still marry. I’m sure that would please your uncle and bring about his change of heart.”

Incensed by the memory of his cruelty and the audacity of his conceit, Rose stepped forward, no longer afraid. Alex had said they would find her brothers, and she trusted him implicitly. “Even if you were the very last man in Britain, I wouldn’t marry you.” Her voice shook with anger. “You are a worm, Julien, crawling in your own dirt and that of my uncle’s, and I want Douglas and Samuel back *now*.”

Anger seethed in his dark eyes, his face mottled with color. He reached to grab for her, but Alex stepped forward and gave a hard shove to his chest, knocking him backward.

Julien struggled to regain his balance while Alex took another step toward him. “I’ve waited a whole year to get my retribution, Dexter. Here and now is as good a time as any.”

“You blighted Scots!” Snarling, Julien started forward, face heavy with rage.

“Don’t do this, brother. Please.”

The quiet voice drifted down from above the stairs. Rose gazed up, along with Alex and Julien, to see a pale young man seated in a wheelchair on the second landing.

On either side of him stood two young boys. The younger eyed her with astonishment. “Sissy!” he cried and scampered down the stairs straight into her arms.

“Samuel!” Tears choked her as she embraced him, while his sobs muffled against her blouse as he clutched her waist. Rose buried her face into his soft brown curls. *Thank you, Lord.*

When she looked up at Douglas, he stood at the polished railing

watching them, suspicion etched into every line of his young face.

Heart drumming, Rose moved Samuel to one side, and with her free hand she reached up to him. “Duggie . . . ?”

Mistrust suddenly gave way to his silent tears, and he rubbed at the wetness before he hurried down the stairs at a more dignified pace than his brother.

When he came to pause in front of her, he tipped his head, his damp blue eyes searching her face. Rose knew the question he wanted to ask. “Be patient with me and I will explain everything, Duggie.” Then she reached to touch his head, grateful he didn’t pull away. “For now, though, I promise you I will never leave you again.”

Then she pulled him into her arms, surprised at the intensity of his embrace.



“You are a better man than you believe, Julien.”

Julien continued staring up at his brother, who smiled on him with love. He’d never heard such words from him before or witnessed this kind of display, not since they were children. “How can you say that, Percy?” Bitterness edged his voice. “You don’t know me.”

“I know that what happened years ago wasn’t intentional, little brother. An accident, and we were children. Father has made a terrible muck of it over the years, but I do not blame you.”

“You never said—”

“You never asked me, Julien. For years, I hoped we might talk, but you always seemed to avoid me.” He lowered his head. “Your visits... usually when you thought I was sleeping.” Finally he looked up. “I came to believe you never wished to discuss what happened.”

So Percy knew. Julien flinched. It was the guilt, always preying on his mind in the form of his father’s voice that had kept him away. He couldn’t even look his brother in the eye, not since he’d become bound to a wheelchair.

Darby arrived on the landing, and it was a minute before Percy was being carried down the stairs by his valet. For a moment, Julien forgot everyone else in the room, and the fact Cutler’s niece and Captain Baird had departed with her brothers. Then he turned and glimpsed the RAF captain he’d seen at the tea shop, standing with two gentlemen he didn’t recognize.

The valet, Darby, set Percy into the wheelchair at the base of the stairs and then nodded toward the men at the back. Julien overheard one of the men standing behind him. "Julien Dexter, you are under arrest for treason, exchanging confidential government secrets for profit. You will need to come with us."

"Please! Just another moment," he begged. His dream had crumbled, and the sadness in his brother's expression told him Percy also knew what he'd been doing in their father's study.

He walked to the wheelchair and knelt down beside his brother. "I'm so sorry, Percy," he whispered, finally meeting his brother's eyes. "I'm sorry for everything."

Percy's pale features softened, and he reached to lay a hand on Julien's shoulder. "I forgave you long ago, Brother. But you failed to forgive yourself." Percy looked away, his burden of pain certainly the worst of all.

"I . . . I only wanted to show Father that I was worth something, and I wanted to take care of you, Percy, always."

Percy turned back to him. "Do what is right, Julien, no matter the cost. I will always love you, and I will pray that one day we can be together again."

Julien broke down against his brother's knee, and it was moments before he finally coughed and wiped his eyes. "Yes, Percy." He rasped the words, gazing up at him. "I'll do it for you."

Then, rising, he turned and accompanied the detectives out of the brownstone.



That evening, Rose, Alex, and her brothers stayed at the home of the Forresters in London. Once she had promised to explain all to the boys in the morning, Rose settled them into Nikki Marche's bedroom, since Eve's young brother was away for the summer in Southwold, serving as a Sea Scout to aid the Coast Guard in monitoring Britain's coasts.

Walking out onto the small terrace, Rose found Alex sitting in the wicker porch swing. The night was warm and clear, with a display of winking stars across the sky.

"May I join you?"

He gestured a hand toward the empty space beside him. Taking that as an invitation, she sat down on the swing and listened to the leaves rustling in the plane trees lining the sidewalk. Eve's honeysuckle bush grew wild along the east fence, surrounding them in fragrance.

"Eve said that Captain Weatherford called while I was tucking the boys into bed. There was a Zeppelin bombing tonight on the Norfolk Coast? That's just an hour from Leicester. How is my aunt?"

"She's fine," Alex said. "And the enemy's attempt failed. There was little damage after the RAF home defense squadron took down the airship."

"Thank goodness. You know, I still cannot believe this nightmare is over," she whispered, staring at him in the shadows.

"Aye." He tipped his head to gaze at the stars. "Weatherford told me that just before Simon contacted Scotland Yard to come to the earl's town house, the office in Leicester called to say your uncle had confessed and implicated Dexter."

Alex turned to her then, his broad grin making her pulse leap. "You were right about Aunt Delia, too. Once she learned her husband would likely go to prison, she was eager to give Weatherford the key to the secret compartment in the desk. The papers he found were probably the same documents you witnessed, and there were more going back

several months. 'Tis fairly certain Cutler and Dexter will face long prison sentences, if not a firing squad for their treason."

Rose nodded. While she was relieved to finally be free to make her own choices, she did regret her uncle's fate. He'd been a difficult man and often a tyrant, but he had taken Rose and her brothers into his home, making certain they were provided for. Not with love, but they'd had enough to eat, a good education, and a roof over their heads.

As for Julien, Rose was glad he no longer held any power over her, and she pitied him. Simon had relayed the confrontation between the brothers after she and Alex and the boys left, and it opened her eyes to Julien's misery and the guilt he'd shouldered all his life. "It is sad the way some parents damage their children, blaming them. And the ways we damage ourselves. Julien Dexter became reckless because he thought he had no worth, nothing to live for."

"Hmm, you've a more tender heart than me, Rose Graham."

"Maybe you would too, Alex, if you forgave yourself." Pausing, she added, "God has."

He glanced at her, and in the shadows it was difficult to see his reaction. He changed the subject. "Your aunt told Weatherford she wants you to return to Leicester. She assured him that your lives would be very different in the future. No doubt she'll have some manner of access to her husband's fortunes."

Rose considered her aunt's offer. In truth, she no longer had a fierce desire to go to Nova Scotia. That had been Tilly's dream after all, and now that she had no fear of her uncle or Julien Dexter, perhaps she could stay. She would need to speak with Douglas and Samuel, to learn if they were happy at their school or if they wished for a simpler, less structured life.

Most of all, she wanted Alex to give her a reason to stay. As if he read her thoughts, she felt his roughened hand rest against hers. When she turned to him, he said, "You know, lass. You remind me of Eve Forrester. In your courage and in your willingness to sacrifice everything for those you love."

Though the waning moon kept him in shadow, the stars reflected in his eyes. "I ken that you've got a better offer before you, but I hope you will consider staying in Gretna Green. Surely, Maw and Da miss you, and Hannah and the lads. And no doubt Winston whines all day when you're not there."

A smile touched her lips, and her heart thumped in her chest as she asked, "Will you miss me as well?"

He moved his face so close to hers that she smelled the coffee on his breath and heard the soft burr in his voice. "Woman, you've not yet left this house and already I ache inside. That's how much I'll be missing you."

While her heart secretly thrilled at his words, she pretended to consider her decision. "You understand, it would mean sacrificing my plans to go to Nova Scotia."

"Aye, New Scotland," he bit out. "When there's nothing wrong with the auld one."

Rose hid her smile. "I suppose you're right. And since I do love you, Alex Baird, I will stay."

He went still beside her for a long moment, before she took pity on him and laid a hand against his cheek. It was her time to choose. "And I'll keep loving you," she said again softly, caressing him. "For as long as we both shall live."

He swept her into his arms then, and she closed her eyes as his lips touched hers, warm and tender and filled with passion. And as she gave him her heart in that kiss, Alex began to gently move the swing back and forth, both of them blissfully unaware of the couple standing near the door, arm in arm, and gazing at them with knowing smiles.



ANNAN, SCOTLAND

LATE SEPTEMBER 1918

From her place high above in the cathedral's loft, Rose Graham looked out over her world for the last time.

For soon she would become Rosalind Baird. Had she really proposed to Alex that night in London?

Humor mingled with her nervous anticipation as she stood back from the balcony and observed the church beginning to fill with familiar faces. There were many from the factory, including some of the lady footballers, and girls she recognized from the dance that night at Border Hall—likely here to again ogle her dashing husband-to-be.

She was delighted to see her supervisor, looking lovely in blue as she entered the church. After the explosion, Mrs. Nash had been understanding about Rose's subterfuge, especially in light of her "heroic action" to save the factory and its workers. Rose suspected Captain Weatherford had planted the seed that she was working undercover for the War Office. Believing she'd kept such a secret, her girls were thrilled and now closer to her than ever.

Several uniformed officers from East Fortune arrived next, and she recognized Colonel Landon, dear man. Rose had been delighted when he offered Alex the post of flight instructor at the airfield, and the colonel would always have her gratitude. While the war was still on, Rose would continue her work at Gretna's factory, though it meant being apart from Alex a few days a week. But at least he could remain in Scotland, safe and close to his family. And the absences would make their reunions all the sweeter.

After London, she'd asked Douglas and Samuel if they wanted to live with her here in Gretna, but then they told her about their friends at Caldicott and how much they missed them. When she took them back,

she stayed for a few days and discovered the headmaster and school founder, Mr. Jenkins, was a kind man devoted to teaching and guiding young boys to become fine men.

She had allowed them to stay on the condition they come home every holiday and during the summers, so they could get to know Fergus and James. Aunt Delia had been saddened, of course, over their decision to remain in Hertfordshire, yet Rose encouraged her to get involved with the war effort, and already she'd opened the Leicester estate to the Red Cross as a rehabilitation home for the wounded. Her aunt seemed to be thriving.

Uncle Ridley and Julien remained in prison, having managed to avoid a firing squad. Still, it would be a long time before either of them saw freedom again.

She gazed toward the altar and was filled anew with thanksgiving for the way God had moved Alex's heart. In recent weeks, he'd begun to visit his brother's memorial with her and his family; and then last Sunday she'd joined him in the parlor as he sat down with his parents and for the first time told them about the scars on his back and why they were there, assuring them Ian Baird had died bravely. It was an emotional time, but Rose sensed Alex had finally found peace in forgiveness, not only for his brother but also for himself.

"Rose?" Hannah called out in a loud whisper from the top of the stairs. "The pastor's here, so you'd better hurry. Maw's having kittens."

Smiling, she followed her future sister-in-law back down to the bridal chamber. Hannah had been overjoyed when Rose asked if she would be her maid of honor, and her seven other girls at the factory were eager to be bridesmaids. Rose had worked steadily every night after work over the past several weeks making the simple yet lovely gowns that each would wear.

"Och, there ye are, lass," Mrs. Baird cried in relief. "I need to finish that hem."

"No need to worry, Mrs. Baird." Eve Forrester stood ready and helped Rose up onto the round dais. "On her wedding day the bride is queen, and the world simply awaits." She winked at Rose while Alex's mother hurried to finish stitching the bottom seam on her lovely white gown.

Eve then retrieved the blue, green, and purple plaid of Clan Baird and draped the tartan across Rose's right shoulder. A trial run before Alex would perform the ritual during the ceremony.

"Where is the pin?" she asked, and Rose offered her the thistle

brooch. Her final legacy from Tilly Lockhart, and now she would honor her friend by wearing it this day.

"You look stunning," Eve said, having fastened the pin and stepped back. "Alex is a lucky man."

"Och no, I'm the jammy one," Rose quipped in her best Scots burr. "He gets a wife to love, and I get a whole clan."

Mrs. Baird chuckled and tied off her thread, then she looked up with love in her eyes. "And I'm jammy to get myself another daughter."

Rose blinked back happy tears. It was true. She had started out as an orphan, losing her parents and then isolated from her brothers, with only a timid shell of an aunt keeping herself hidden among the somber halls at Leicester. Not like a real family, with people unafraid to express their love or to laugh and tease and stay true to each other. And now she was about to have it all.

"May I come in?" Hannah called softly from the other side of the door. "I've got the flower bearer."

At her mother's assent, the girl entered with Winston, a swath of the Baird plaid tied around his neck. "Are ye certain the wee dog will carry that basket of flowers . . . or chew it up?" Mrs. Baird asked her daughter.

"Winston will do fine. I've been training him."

Rose grinned, recalling the past two weeks as Hannah ran the dog through his paces.

"I've seen Alex, Rose. He looks so braw in his uniform kilt, even if he is my brother."

Rose's pulse leapt as she imagined how handsome her future husband must be.

The future. After he'd shared with his parents about Ian, she and Alex had made a promise—to forgive themselves and each other, and always to love and look ahead with God's guidance.

A knock sounded. "The pastor is ready when you are."

Her heart fluttered. "Thank you, Douglas," Rose called out. "Are you and Samuel ready with the bridesmaids?"

"We're ready."

At the sufferance in his voice, she smiled. Obviously, Douglas wasn't yet old enough to appreciate the face of a pretty girl.

Once Eve removed the Baird plaid and pin to give to Alex downstairs, Mrs. Baird handed Rose the bridal bouquet—the same purple heather, green ivy, and yellow tansies she'd made for Eve's wedding years before. Her bridal crown consisted of tiny blue

hydrangea blossoms, white burnet roses, and more of the heather.

“’Tis time, lovely Rose.” Mrs. Baird stood back and surveyed her from head to toe while Eve left to go in search of baby Zoe, who was in the care of her father, Alex’s best man.

Rose drew a deep breath and hugged her mother-to-be. Surprisingly, the Bairds had taken her secret in stride and now enjoyed calling her Rose instead of Miss Lockhart.

She left the bridal chamber to find Mr. Baird already waiting for her. He looked smart in his kilt and jacket, his cane in hand.

“What a bonny sight you are, Daughter,” he said, smiling as he held out his arm to her.

The music began once Mrs. Baird found her seat, and butterflies invaded Rose’s stomach.

“Dinna think to run away now, lass, or I willna be able to catch you,” her father-to-be said knowingly beside her, and she grinned, grateful for the way he’d put her at ease.

As they walked down the aisle toward the altar, she made herself wait to look at Alex—eyeing first her brothers, along with Fergus and James, escorting her bridesmaids; then Winston, who actually carried the flower basket handle in his mouth without stopping to chew it to shreds.

She smiled at Aunt Delia, standing in the pew wiping happy tears from her eyes; and Eve and the baby and then Mrs. Nash and others who beamed as they watched her procession.

Simon looked handsome in his uniform, now standing beside the man who would become her husband.

Rose finally let her gaze settle on Alex, and she thought she’d never seen a man looking more fine. Garbed in his RAF captain’s tunic with his many medals and ribbons, he’d chosen to wear a military kilt, complete with stockings and boots.

He stood tall, his broad shoulders drawn back, and his steady, loving eyes focused entirely on her.

Mr. Baird gently handed her over to his son, while Simon stepped back and the pastor began the ceremony. She and Alex repeated their vows, their eyes never leaving each other. As he settled the Baird tartan across her shoulder and leaned to pin the plaid at her waist, Rose suddenly realized she’d needed to become someone else in order to find herself. And as her new husband straightened, his green eyes still gazing into hers, she knew she had found her home.

Author's Note

Dear Friends,

Thank you for reading *As Dawn Breaks* and spending time with Rose, Alex, and the rest of the Baird clan.

For all of us, 2020 was a strange year, the COVID-19 pandemic ushering in a “new normal” of masks and social distancing, struggling economies, and the grief of losing loved ones. A time when we yearned to be with family and friends but for safety’s sake kept ourselves in a state of self-quarantine.

I believe inspiration for the novel, in part, came from this longing; in creating my fictional family, I was allowed to relive some of my own fond memories and to some extent appease that deep yearning to see my loved ones living far away. My hope is that the story did the same for you.

I’d also like to add that while my novel takes place in 1918 and the birth of the Spanish Flu, I chose to set my story during mid-summer, when the influenza pandemic had temporarily abated—staying true to the history while offering a respite to readers from our modern-day reality.

In starting my book research for any given time period, I love discovering those nuggets of interest that spark an idea, and the female munitions workers of the First World War certainly captured my imagination. In 1915, the “Shell Scandal” underscored Great Britain’s lack of ammunition in a war that was taking far longer to win than anyone had initially foreseen. Construction of munitions factories began raging across the country, and with so many men fighting overseas, women were recruited into this branch of the workforce.

Known as munitionettes, these ladies worked in foundries manufacturing shell casings; they worked in the Pressing rooms to fill those shells with TNT Amatol and they operated overhead cranes and other heavy equipment to load the shells for shipment to the troops. In

places like Gretna, Scotland they also made cordite, the propellant used in ammunition. Like the “Tommies” fighting overseas, munitionettes risked their lives daily with the ever-present threat of an accidental explosion, and enduring long hours of exposure to the harsh chemicals. Health problems like dizziness, jaundice, chronic lung congestion, rotting teeth, thinning hair, and internal organ damage were often the result, and many died. Those who worked closest with the disulfuric acids in TNT Amatol, nitroglycerin, and nitrocotton developed yellowed skin and bleached hair and were affectionately known as “Canary Girls.”

Most were patriots, though some simply wanted to earn higher wages compared to those of domestics or shop help. Others did it for the adventure, or in the name of suffrage, or the chance to simply get out of the house and socialize in the workplace. Whatever their reasons, all were dedicated to their tasks, and if not for these women, the lives of countless more soldiers would have been lost, with the war ending badly for the Allies.

My research also led me to discover the real Merchant of Death—arms-dealing millionaire, Sir Basil Zaharoff. A Greek born in Turkey and living in Paris, Sir Basil was a true man of mystery and soon became the inspiration for my character, Didymos Kahverengi. Sir Basil enjoyed disguise and subterfuge, and allegedly sold weapons to both sides during the war. Though considered the most famous arms dealer of that time, he was never arrested for crimes linked to arms dealing, I suspect because his secret trysts were among many being clandestinely negotiated by armaments manufacturers across Europe. Sadly, war is and will always be a profitable business.

The pencil bombs Rhymer sent to both Tilly and Rose were in fact real timed explosives used by German agents against the U.S. prior to America’s 1917 entry into WWI. As a neutral power, the U.S. sold and shipped desperately needed munitions to Britain, and it became the mission of a network of German spies living in America to sabotage those shipments and prevent their passing into Allied hands. Pencil bombs made it convenient for the enemy to detonate and place the three-inch timed device among a ship or a train’s cargo, so that the blast would occur long after the culprit had fled. And the bomb’s lead outer coating would leave no trace. One of the most devastating U.S. munitions explosions was the Black Tom Explosion of 1916. Two million tons of war materials packed into train cars had blown up in the Black Tom railroad yard on what is now a part of Liberty State

Park. Thousands of windows shattered in lower Manhattan and Jersey City. Shrapnel pockmarked the Statue of Liberty. Three men and a baby were killed by the explosive energy that erupted from this act of sabotage.¹

On that sober note, I'd like to finish with elucidating further some facts regarding the investigation into the real explosion at No. 6 Chilwell Shell Filling factory in Nottingham, on July 1, 1918. The British Home Office initiated their inquiry on July 8, and Scotland Yard investigated the premises for a mere two days. The official enquiry report was printed and presented on August 7, less than one month later, with no specific recommendations being made, although this report was marked SECRET.²

So, was it enemy sabotage? Or was it due to a range of possible reasons offered up by factory workers, like extreme temperatures that day overheating the machinery, a spark, a hot bearing, spontaneous combustion, rebellious electricians? Even the IRA was mentioned.³ I suppose we'll never know for sure.

If you'd like to read more in depth about the Gretna and Chilwell factories of WWI, I've included book titles and authors in my Acknowledgments.

Enjoy the history!

—K.B.

1. <https://web.archive.org/web/20090715040912/http://www.fbi.gov/page2/july04/blacktom073004.htm>.

2. Maureen Rushton, *Canary Girls of Chilwell* (Newton Books: Nottingham, UK, 2nd Edition, 2016), p. 65.

3. Ibid., p. 63.

Questions for Discussion

1. Rose Graham's life suddenly changes when she dares to fake her own death and take on the persona of her deceased best friend and co-worker, Tilly Lockhart. Rose's intent is to escape an unwanted marriage while saving her brothers from their guardian's threat. But her bold move proves more hazardous than she'd imagined, and she comes to realize she didn't know Tilly at all. Have you ever wished to be someone else—a school friend, co-worker, community member, or celebrity—only to learn their life wasn't what it seemed? What important lesson did you take away from the experience?
2. After her “death,” Rose flees the unloving environment in Leicester to return to her Scottish homeland. Struggling with guilt, knowing her brothers grieve for her at their boarding school, Rose longs to one day make them a real family again, just as they were before their parents' deaths. Once employed at Gretna, Rose takes a room with the Baird family and receives more warmth and affection than she ever dreamt possible. In fact, she's loath to leave, even when she suspects Alex is spying for Julien. When you were growing up, did you ever enjoy spending time with another family besides your own? If you'd care to share your reasons, why did you feel this way?
3. Living with the Bairds is a drastic change from Rose's restrictive boarding school life. She learns quickly the two youngest lads, Fergus and James, are a handful, while their sister, Hannah, is an

emotional young woman who leans toward theatrics. As you read about these characters, were you reminded of any siblings or other family members in your own life? Do any funny anecdotes come to mind?

4. When she leaves for Gretna, Rose decides to take Tilly's small dog, Winston, whose antics prove to be cute but also detrimental when they reveal her secret to Rhymer. Do you have a pet? If so, what is their most memorable stunt or funny habit?
5. In the first two weeks at the factory, young Rose encounters difficulties with her workers. She becomes the victim of several innocent, yet annoying pranks and is at a loss of how to deal with the issue without revealing to her boss her lack of leadership skills. Have you ever experienced a similar situation at work or at school? Were you a prankster or the target? Any amusing anecdotes or lessons you'd like to share? How would you have handled Rose's dilemma?
6. After the Chilwell explosion, Rose returns to the cottage to discover Tilly's planned party gifts. Most important was a trade card for an alleged forger and the note on the back, *Become a new person, Rose, if you have the courage*. Rose recalls those words repeatedly as she imagines becoming just like her brave friend, through her work and football and standing up to bullies. What she discovers instead are her own strengths—the confidence that was once hers before her parents died. Discuss how you or someone you know had to overcome a personal challenge in order to accomplish a dream or a goal. What was that obstacle? Fear, shyness, or lack of confidence in learning something new? How did you succeed, and were you surprised at what you learned from the experience?
7. Alex Baird carries the weight of guilt over his brother's death. While he tried to save Ian from deserting, his pursuit indirectly caused his brother's plane to crash. His faith helps him understand that God has forgiven him, but his conscience isn't convinced. This often happens with Christians, and the guilt we experience can end up ruining our lives. Discuss ways in which we can overcome this self-inflicted punishment through action and think of Scripture passages that may help us learn to trust in

God's mercy.

8. After his brother's death in the crash, Alex Baird decides to keep secret from his family—and everyone else—Ian's attempted desertion and the treasonous papers found on his person. Do you think Alex was right to do so? What would you have done in his place?
9. Which character in the story surprised you the most? Which character did you find the most tragic and why?
10. The young women working at HM Factory Gretna, like those at Chilwell and other munitions factories, suffered side effects from the harsh chemicals and risked their lives by working with explosives. Deadly accidents were not uncommon, and over the course of the war, hundreds were killed. Still, a munitionette's wages were among the highest for women, and they enjoyed the freedom of wearing more comfortable clothes and doing important work for the war effort. Other jobs like policewomen, firewomen, tank builders, farmers, scientists, nurses, railroad engineers, and Lumber Jills, to name a few, were also available to women during the war. If you had lived then, what job would you have applied for and why?
11. If the story were continued, which characters would you want to know more about?

Acknowledgments

A lot goes into creating a story—researching an idea, then plotting, outlining, writing, revising, editing, and more revising. A seemingly endless process until the manuscript finally goes to print. Most importantly, though, it is a lot of prayer and hard work, and so above all I thank God for His gifts, for inspiring me to sit down each day and write the words. And to my husband, John, your love and support mean so much to me, not only in holding the fort during my long absences upstairs at the computer, but also being my wonderful first reader. Thank you!

As always, my deep affection and appreciation go to my critique partners, mentors, and friends, especially Anjali Banerjee, Lois Faye Dyer, Rose Marie Harris, Patty Jough-Haan, Debbie Macomber, Darlene Panzera, Sheila Roberts, Krysteen Seelen, and Susan Wiggs. Sharing your time, wisdom, and support for this novel has been a blessing to me!

My special thanks to Chris Brader for his 2001 PhD thesis, *TimberTown Girls: Gretna Female Munitions Workers in World War I*, an incredibly detailed history of Scotland's HM Factory Gretna and the young women who made up its workforce. And to British historian Maureen Rushton and her 2016 work, *Canary Girls of Chilwell*, depicting a day in the life of the munitionettes at No. 6 Chilwell factory and offering detailed, firsthand accounts from those who survived the horrific explosion of July 1, 1918. From both of you I gleaned much, and while mine is a fictional work, any literary license or errors in information are solely my responsibility.

To my dear agent, Linda S. Glaz, and my wonderful editors, Raela Schoenherr, Luke Hinrichs, Elizabeth Frazier, and the rest of the Bethany House family who helped to bring this project to fruition, I thank you for your guidance, encouragement, and support.

About the Author

Former bookseller-turned-author, **Kate Breslin** enjoys life in the Pacific Northwest with her husband and family. She is a Carol Award winner and a RITA and Christy Award finalist who loves reading, hiking, and traveling. New destinations make for fresh story ideas.

To learn more, visit her website at www.katebreslin.com.



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In spring 1918, British Lieutenant Colin Mabry receives an urgent message from a woman he once loved but thought dead. Feeling the need to redeem himself, he travels to France—only to find the woman's half sister, Johanna, who believes her sister is alive and the prisoner of a German spy. As they seek answers across Europe, danger lies at every turn.

Far Side of the Sea



In 1917, British nurse and war widow Evelyn Marche is trapped in German-occupied Brussels. She works at the hospital by day and as a waitress by night. But she also has a secret: She's a spy for the resistance. When a British plane crashes in the park, Evelyn must act quickly to protect the injured soldier who has top-secret orders and a target on his back.

High as the Heavens



When suffragette Grace Mabry hands a white feather of cowardice to Jack Benningham—an English spy masquerading as a conscientious objector—she could not anticipate the danger and betrayal set in motion by her actions. Soon, she and Jack are forced to learn the true meaning of courage when the war raging overseas strike much closer to home.

Not by Sight



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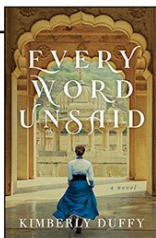


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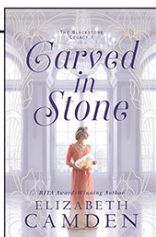
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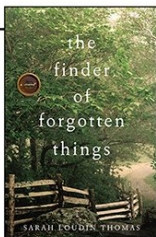
As the nation's most fearless travel columnist, Augusta Travers explores the country, spinning stories for women unable to leave hearth and home. Suddenly caught in a scandal, she escapes to India to visit old friends, promising great tales of boldness. But instead she encounters a plague, new affections, and the realization that she can't outrun her past.

Every Word Unsaid by Kimberly Duffy
kimberlyduffy.com



When lawyer Patrick O'Neill agrees to resurrect an old mystery and challenge the Blackstones' legacy of greed and corruption, he doesn't expect to be derailed by the kindhearted family heiress, Gwen Kellerman. She is tasked with getting him to drop the case, but when the mystery takes a shocking twist, he is the only ally she has.

Carved in Stone by Elizabeth Camden
THE BLACKSTONE LEGACY #1
elizabethcamden.com



After promising a town he'd find them water and then failing, Sullivan Harris is on the run; but he grows uneasy when one success makes folks ask him to find other things—like missing items or sons. When men are killed digging the Hawks Nest Tunnel, Sully is compelled to help, and it becomes the catalyst for finding what even he has forgotten—hope.

The Finder of Forgotten Things by Sarah Loudin Thomas
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Her daring bid for freedom could be her greatest undoing.



Amid the Great War in 1918 England, munitions worker Rosalind Graham is desperate to escape the arranged marriage being forced on her by her ruthless guardian. When the Chilwell factory explodes, killing hundreds of unidentified workers, Rose realizes the world believes she perished in the disaster. Seizing the chance to escape, she risks all and assumes a new identity, taking a supervisory position in Gretna, Scotland, as Miss Tilly Lockhart.

RAF Captain Alex Baird is returning home to Gretna on a secret mission to uncover the saboteur suspected in the Chilwell explosion, as Gretna's factory is likely next. Fearing for his family's safety, he's also haunted by guilt after failing to protect his brother. Alex is surprised to discover a young woman, Miss Lockhart, renting his boyhood room, but the two eventually bond over their mutual affection for his family—until Alex receives orders to surveil her.

Rose squirms beneath Alex's scrutiny while she struggles to gain her workers' respect. But when her deception turns to danger, she and Alex must find a way to put their painful pasts behind them and together try to safeguard the future.

"With her trademark attention to historical detail, Kate Breslin sweeps readers to a Great War home front full of intrigue, suspense, danger, and courage."

—**Jocelyn Green**, Christy Award-winning author of *Shadows of the White City*

"Readers will be captivated by this exquisite blend of historical intrigue and heartfelt romance from one of the finest voices in inspirational fiction."

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